





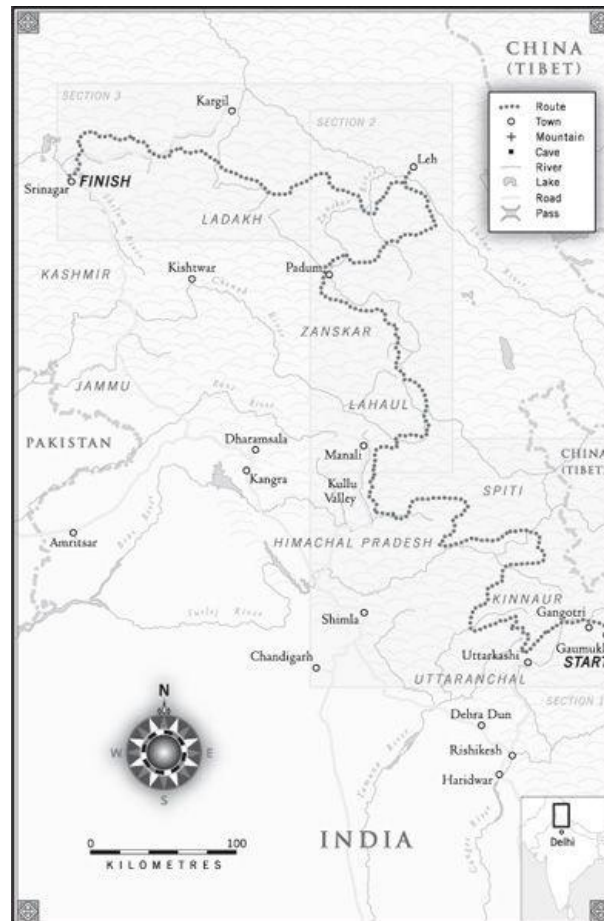
**A LONG WALK IN THE**

**HIMALAYA**

# A LONG WALK IN THE HIMALAYA

A TREK FROM THE GANGES TO KASHMIR

Garry Weare



First published 2007  
This e-book edition 2011  
Transit Lounge Publishing  
95 Stephen Street  
Yarraville, Australia 3013  
[www.transitlounge.com.au](http://www.transitlounge.com.au)  
[info@transitlounge.com.au](mailto:info@transitlounge.com.au)

Copyright ©Garry Weare 2007

This book is copyright. Apart from any fair dealing for the purpose of private study, research, criticism or review, as permitted under the Copyright Act, no part may be reproduced by any process without written permission. Inquiries should be made to the publisher.

Every effort has been made to obtain permission for excerpts reproduced in this publication. In cases where these efforts were unsuccessful, the copyright holders are asked to contact the publisher directly.

Maps by Ian Faulkner  
Photographs: Garry Weare/Lonely Planet Images  
Design by Peter Lo

National Library of Australia  
Cataloguing-in-publication data

Weare, Garry.  
A long walk in the Himalaya : a trek from the Ganges to Kashmir.

Bibliography.  
ISBN 9780980846270 (e-book).

1. Weare, Garry - Travel. 2. Himalaya Mountains - Description and travel. 3. India, Northeastern - Description and travel. I. Title.

915.49604

## Contents

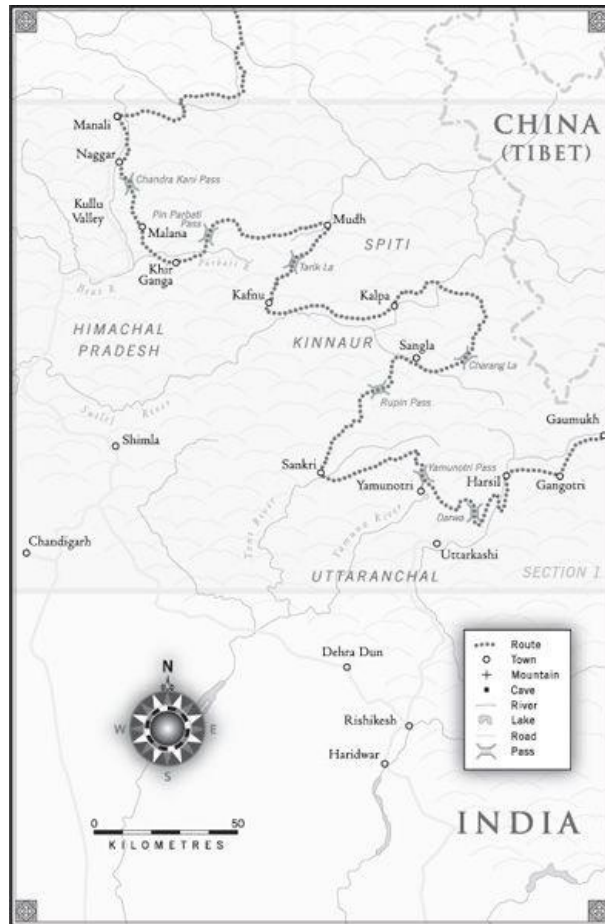
	<u>Introduction</u>
1	<u>The Man Who Lived in Paradise</u>
	<u>High Passes to Manali</u>
2	<u>A Camp High Above the Ganges</u>
3	<u>The Pilgrim Way</u>
4	<u>A Summer Ramble in the Himalaya</u>
5	<u>A Road to Tibet</u>
6	<u>A Village Called Mudh</u>
7	<u>Traversing the Pin Parbati</u>
8	<u>A Sojourn in the Kullu Valley</u>
	<u>Heading North to Leh</u>
9	<u>In the Footsteps of The Gaddi</u>
10	<u>Wandering Zaskar</u>
11	<u>Beyond The High Passes</u>
12	<u>The Flight of the Wind Horse</u>
13	<u>The King's Palace</u>
	<u>Traverse to Kashmir</u>
14	<u>Exploring the Hidden Valleys</u>
15	<u>Where Three Worlds Meet</u>
16	<u>A Short Walk Down the Sindh Valley</u>
17	<u>New Maharajah's Palace</u>
18	<u>Kashmir—Unfinished Business</u>
	<u>Bibliography</u>

## **Introduction**

Garry Weare is enigmatic, funny and he has an enormous conscience. He brings into the story of his Himalayan traverse a succession of vignettes about people's lives that he meets along the way, relevant history, natural history observations and a delightful sprinkling of his inimitable sense of humour. The warmth of his relationships with his old Kashmiri friends and various people from the trekking fraternity adds a wonderful dimension to this journeyman's tale. And slowly but surely Garry tells us why he eschewed the company of old friends like me, with their ample supplies of single malt whisky and chose instead to trek the remote trails of the Indian Himalaya with his ponymen and 'fresh batteries' who were long time colleagues and mountain guides. From his thirty years in the Himalaya. Garry, or Guru to many of his old buddies, is well known in the western Himalaya and in the Himalayan community in Australia. Guru Weare—Raja Weare by his own confession—tells us of his five-month long trek across some of the world's most beautiful and rugged terrain, and his deep love and empathy for its culture and people.

His references to requiring the services of the best tailors for repairs to his favourite shirt in half a dozen bazaars across the Himalaya and later turning down a lift from a steamroller driver as he triumphantly trekked the roadside into the Vale of Kashmir are marvellous examples of Garry's quirky and eccentric nature. His description of his progressively svelte physique and flowing grey beard is an inspiration to those of us forging our way through our fifties and, earnestly hoping wisdom follows suit. This book is a delightful read by one of the finest true gentlemen I know.

Peter Hillary





# **CHAPTER 1**

## **The Man Who Lived in Paradise**

It is sometimes said that it is best to get the disasters over early in your life. I can appreciate that. In 1973, as a young man of twenty-five, I arranged my first Himalayan trek to Kashmir in northern India. I had already trekked extensively in Kashmir and Nepal, but after spending two years teaching English in colleges in Yorkshire I had become increasingly restless to return. This would be my first venture into the heady world of adventure travel. Advertising in the personal columns of the *Times* I sought six hardy souls to share costs and undertake a trek from Kashmir to the Buddhist region of Ladakh. Rumour had it that the Indian government was about to de-restrict Ladakh, on the politically sensitive borderlands of Tibet, and permit foreigners to travel there for the first time since 1947. Since trekking in Kashmir in 1970 I had read as much as possible about Ladakh. From all accounts its culture and history were similar to that of Tibet, a land at the time completely off bounds to foreigner travellers. Ladakh—also referred to as Little Tibet—would be a great alternative. I had little problem convincing a group of trekkers to join me. Five months later we were all in jail.

After travelling overland from London to Kashmir and spending a week trekking through the mountain valleys, we traversed a remote glacial pass and took our first steps into Ladakh. At first all went to plan. Reaching the first village the local police sergeant welcomed us. He assumed we had all the relevant documentation. The following day we wandered up a ridge and met a yak train of Buddhist traders intent on reaching the markets of Kargil, the largest town some 60 kilometres down the valley. On our return the sergeant was waiting for us.

‘Sir you are not allowed here, you must go back to Kashmir or come to Kargil.’ After considering the alternatives we decided on the Kargil option. Fair enough we thought, from there we might even be allowed to get a bus and visit Leh, the ancient capital of Ladakh.

The following day, after several hours’ march, we caught a ramshackle bus that five hours and one breakdown later trundled into the Kargil bazaar. This was where our luck ran out. Arriving at the police station, we found the policemen brushing the dusty courtyard as if their lives depended on it. Our arrival coincided with the annual visit to Kargil by the Director General of Police for the State of Jammu and Kashmir. At 4pm that afternoon a convoy of jeeps sped through the main bazaar to the station. A line of policemen stood to attention as a kindly gentleman, with twinkling eyes and a well-trimmed silver moustache stepped out of the first jeep. Hushed voices informed him of our presence and, after a cursory inspection of his men, he approached us.

‘I believe you have been trekking?’ he asked.

I explained something of our route.

He nodded, asking the condition of the pass we had crossed.

The Director General seemed impressed and not particularly concerned that we had broken the law. All seemed to be going well. Just a ticking off, I thought until the inspector’s aide-de-camp arrived on the scene.

‘But sir,’ he piped up with the assumed importance possessed by so many self-righteous young prigs in uniform ‘even if they have stepped just one foot into Ladakh they have broken the law.’

Even in 1973 zero tolerance had meaning. Unconvinced the elderly Director General stood his ground until the prig in uniform started to re-iterate our misdeeds. In the end, the prig had his way and we were detained at the pleasure of the Kargil constabulary for ten days awaiting trial. In the realms of legal drama this would not rate on prime time TV. On the day we were to be sentenced we were escorted into the court where the magistrate read out a prepared statement. He consigned us to imprisonment until the rising of the court—literally until the end of the day. That was the deal. The magistrate smiled at us and announced how much he and his fellow officials had enjoyed our company, before inviting us to join him for dinner that night. The next morning the police escorted us by bus back to Srinagar the capital of Kashmir. It was not the most auspicious start to my career organising and leading treks in Kashmir.

Returning in 1976, I stayed on a houseboat in Dal Lake from where I would lead small trekking

groups into the mountains for the next thirteen years. It had taken a few strokes of luck for my plans to materialise. After returning to the UK in autumn 1973 I was broke. One overcast afternoon I was thumbing through a copy of *National Geographic* magazine that included an article on the life of young men working in the Australian bush. Two months later I was on my way.

On arrival in West Australia in January 1974 I abandoned any pretense of an academic career and signed up with a mineral sands mining company in Eneabba, about 200 kilometres north of Perth. By the end of the year I was musclebound, sunburnt and financially solvent. The following year I worked for a time in Tasmania and then in Darwin in Australia's 'Top End' before meeting in Sydney a young couple who had recently established Australian Himalayan Expeditions, a company promoting treks to Nepal. After a memorable evening of pasta and red wine they got down to business. 'Why not join us?' was how Christine Gee and her partner Goronwy Price popped the question. It took me all of five seconds to accept. For me it was the perfect solution. They would provide the administrative and marketing support for my treks while I would spend up to six months of each year leading treks in Kashmir. Each season an increasing number of trekkers would stay on the houseboats for a few days before heading off on the mountain trails. Friendships were made, dreams fulfilled and, for most, the experience exceeded their wildest expectations. It was an idyllic lifestyle, something not lost on one journalist who was later to describe me as 'the man who lives in Paradise'.

It was a gun pointing into my taxi—what make of gun I have no idea—that finally convinced me that my heavenly existence in Kashmir was over. It was July 1990 and a member of the Jammu and Kashmir Liberation Front had stopped the car on a lonely road in a remote corner of the Kashmir Valley. Meraj Din, a long-time Kashmir friend, got out of the car. Voices were raised until Din assured a misguided youth that we were simply trying to devise new trekking routes to circumvent the increasingly unstable climate in the Vale of Kashmir.

The end had been on the cards for three years. In 1987, state elections were held in Jammu and Kashmir. The resounding victory for Dr Farooq Abdullah, the leader of the National Conference Party, augured closer ties with Rajiv Gandhi, the Indian prime minister. It also marked a turning point in Kashmir's uncertain history. Since 1947 the former maharajah's state had been the subject of heated dispute between India and Pakistan and even after two wars there was no sign of a resolution. For those favouring some degree of independence for Kashmir the elections were cited as a turning point that precipitated the instability that still leaves its mark across Kashmir.

I realised that I would have to trek elsewhere in order to make a living. In 1986 I had written the first edition of the Lonely Planet guide *Trekking in the Indian Himalaya*. I now knew that without Kashmir subsequent editions of my guidebook would look woefully thin. I had no choice but to focus my efforts on the less frequented mountain regions of Ladakh, Himachal Pradesh, the Garhwal and Kumaon located between Kashmir and the borders of Tibet and Nepal. The regions were also ideally suited to a new range of treks that I would incorporate into the World Expedition's Himalayan program—for by now the company had changed from Australian Himalayan Expeditions to a worldwide adventure travel company. I pursued my research with a passion, crossing new passes and discovering cultures far from the Kashmir Valley. Yet I never stopped dreaming about my houseboat and reflecting on some of the happiest times of my life.

It was during one of my treks in 1995 that I first toyed with the idea of undertaking an extended trek. I was within a day or so of the sacred source of the Ganges. It was a spectacular one-week trek but for me it was far too short. I was only too aware that no sooner had I put on my boots than I was repacking my kitbag and heading back home. I felt I needed a challenge. Why not, I thought, take a few months off and combine a series of treks into one big one? Before I knew it I was jotting down a list of the treks that I needed to research for the next edition of my guidebook. I then devised a route that would take me from the source of the Ganges to the Trans-Himalayan region of Ladakh. But why stop there, I mused? Why not continue and trek all the way to Kashmir?

At first the prospect was daunting.

How could I take five or six months off?

How could I say goodbye to my teenage daughter and my friends?

Would I be fit enough? After all I was no longer in the prime of my youth.

How would I organise the logistics?

How much would it all cost?

There were many good reasons to let my dream slip away. But it didn't. I was determined to trek from Gaumukh, the sacred source of the Ganges to Gangabal Lake in Kashmir, one of the sacred sources of the Indus. It would provide a superb opportunity to re-discover a vast and varied mountainscape, from subtropical forests and verdant alpine meadows carpeted with wildflowers to an almost lunar geography north of the Himalayan divide.

The trek would also enable me to explore three distinct cultural worlds. As Alexandra Drew, at the time in the 'service' of the Maharajah of Kashmir, wrote in 1877 in his *The Northern Barrier of India*, there is no other spot in Asia where the three cultural worlds of Hinduism, Buddhism and Islam meet. That observation still holds true today. On the initial stages of my trek I would share trails with Hindu pilgrims and villagers before reaching the Buddhist land of Ladakh with its ancient monasteries perched on sugarloaf mountains and tiny whitewashed settlements nestled in the deepest gorges. A rugged region close to the bordelands of Tibet from where I would cross a further series of high passes to Kashmir—a fabled land of mosques and minarets—and my houseboat on Dal Lake.

Returning home to Australia, I set out a day-to-day trekking itinerary on a spreadsheet, including reserve days for inclement weather, illness and unforeseen logistical delays. By my calculations my trek would be around 2500 kilometres long and commit me to crossing at least twenty passes, most in the vicinity of 5000 metres. It would take around five months from the middle of May until the middle of October. (For those whose life in the great outdoors is never complete without a pedometer read no further. While the actual distance on a map between Gangotri and Kashmir is no more than 600 kilometres my trek weaved over passes and through valleys that at least doubled the most direct trekking route, let alone the distance as the crow flies. My calculation of 2500 kilometres is based on a simple formula of multiplying the actual number of days trekking (120 to 130 according to my spreadsheet) by 20 kilometres a day.)

While I savoured the prospect of undertaking a five-month trek I sometimes found it hard to relate to some of my less energetic friends. 'Haven't you had enough of trekking?' was a common query. For anyone vaguely familiar with the delights of trekking, the Himalaya holds the promise of discovery no matter how many times you return. I wasn't out to break any records. It was not to be a 'man against the mountains' epic. Neither was I attempting to trek the entire Himalaya. Indeed, a glance at a map reveals that I would be covering only a small portion of the entire range. My plan was to complete a continuous trek with time to reflect on what is a spectacular and very special corner of the world's youngest mountain range.

The proposed trek was ambitious but by no means original. A century ago it was not uncommon for the British to wander the Himalaya for months at a time. Dressed in tweed outfits and accompanied by a team of helpers and porters they kept detailed journals as they forded raging torrents, ascended steep, forested slopes and traversed high passes. Little was mentioned about hardship. Carrying no more than a flask of tea, a packet of biscuits, a hard-boiled egg and an occasional tot of brandy to withstand the cold they would cross windswept passes that would test the best of us. There was little in the way of back-up. Setting off from the Indian hill stations of Shimla or Mussoorie, they would trek for months at a time, often meeting no more than a handful of Europeans as they made their way over the passes to Kashmir.

From the outset I decided that I would also trek in a similar style. I proposed to invite a few of my Indian friends and guides to join me on various stages of the trek. I would engage a cook. Each night I envisaged dining out on a steaming hot curry of rice, dhal and vegetables to be washed down with a tot or two of India's finest non-vintage Old Monk rum. Porters or mule attendants would be hired to carry my inordinate amount of gear. I would also make arrangements to stay occasionally in a simple hotel or guesthouse whenever I reached a large village or trailhead. For the rest of the trek my nylon dome tent pitched in all number of idyllic locations would be home.

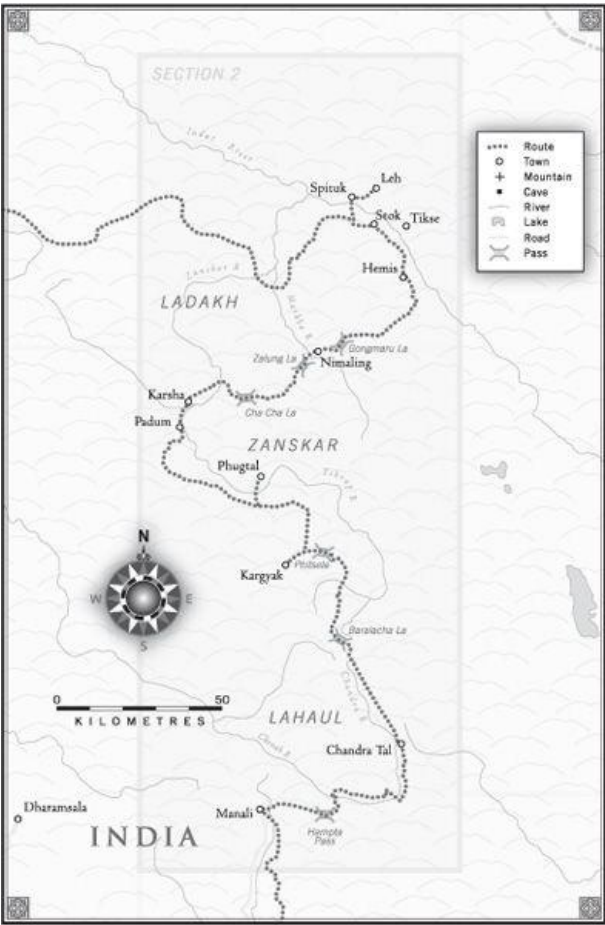
'Get a distillery to sponsor you. You could call the trek "A gentleman's guide to sipping single-malt whisky while trekking in the Himalaya",' was mountaineer Peter Hillary's suggestion. 'Do that and I might just join you for a week or two,' he mused. Peter along with Chewang Tashi from Darjeeling and New Zealand mountaineer Graeme Dingle had already claimed a first when they traversed the Himalaya from Sikkim to Pakistan over ten months in 1981. Since then many others had followed in their footsteps.

Yet, in spite of all the light-hearted banter I was concerned for my safety, particularly in the later stages of the trek when I reached Kashmir. The tragic circumstances involving a group of trekkers presumed murdered in 1995 had broken any illusion that foreigners were immune from danger. Indeed, it seemed at first almost foolhardy to contemplate a trek there. From the outset I told myself that I would not take any untoward chances. If completing my trek through Kashmir proved impossible, well so be it.

As it turned out, it took me another five years to embark on my traverse. For reasons best

known to my bank manager and my teenage daughter I did not follow my initial instincts. It was not until May 2003 that I set off. For many Australians, fifty-five is the age of retirement. An age that broadly equates with the final stage of the Hindu life cycle when some elect to follow the life of a *sannyasi*—a person renouncing friends, family and material possessions—and set off, for instance, into the Himalaya to discover life's spiritual purpose. Although I would not claim to have any spiritual disposition, I was on similar mission that would hopefully see me trekking in Kashmir again for the first time in thirteen years.

**High Passes To Manali**



## **CHAPTER 2**

### **A Camp High Above the Ganges**

'You should stay with me, there is no need to trek to Kashmir'. For Indradev Panda there seemed no reason for me to leave. After all I was camped alongside the guru's cave high above the sacred source of the Ganges.

Few trekkers had visited Indradev Panda's cave that season. There was a dusting of snow on the high ridges while the meadow at Tabovan was only just emerging from the winter snows. It would be another week or more before the tiny clusters of gentians and primula would emerge along the watercourses. The only signs that spring was on the way were the fresh pellets of the *bharal*—the ubiquitous cross between wild sheep and goat—that were foraging for sustenance in the dry brown grass, and the flocks of tiny rose finches busily reacquainting themselves with their summer habitat.

Stroking his luxuriant black beard, Indradev Panda seemed profoundly content. He sat on a boulder wrapped in an embroidered woollen dressing gown that dropped to his ankles, basking in the early morning sun. His gaze rested on the sacred summit of Shivering. Turning his head, his eyes seemed to penetrate me. 'There is no need to trek to Kashmir,' he repeated. 'Stay with me.' In such idyllic surroundings it was easy for me to consider his offer and it was, I knew, a genuine request. Too many holy men in the Himalaya are anything but holy, but Indradev Panda was of a different kind. We had taken an instant liking to each other during the couple of days I had spent camping near his cave contemplating the next stages of my five-month trek across the Indian Himalaya.

It did not seem like a week since I had arrived in Delhi. It had been the second week in May and even in the middle of the night it was 35°C with humid air seeping through the air-conditioning ducts of the airport. After queuing for an eternity to clear immigration, I had retrieved my three kitbags from the carousel. Outside, my old friend Almas Khan, dark, short and stocky with an impish grin that belied his thirty-four years, appeared through a sea of onlookers. With baseball cap reversed over his closely shaven head he looked more like a rap singer with attitude than a seasoned mountain guide. Pushing my trolley past the milling crowd we made our way to an awaiting taxi. No sooner were we moving than I got down to business. 'All OK for the trek?'

'Yep, we can go over everything tomorrow.' That was the sum of our conversation as we weaved at breakneck speed past the Indian capital's dimly lit buses, overloaded trucks, and cars that seemed intent on reaching nirvana by midnight. Before I knew it, I was unpacking my gear in an air-conditioned hotel room. It was 12.30am and I was ready for bed.

I awoke with the morning rush hour well underway. Before meeting Almas I needed time for a quick culture fix. As I stepped outside my hotel, a wave of chilli-hot air forced its way into my lungs. A couple of days in Delhi would be about all I could take. Although always pleased to be back in India—is there any country that can constantly stimulate the senses and curiosity as much—I hated the heat and counted off the days till I could head north to the cooler climes of the Himalayan foothills.

'Taxi, taxi Sir' A driver outside my hotel pleaded with my sanity. Any individual with half a brain would have taken up his offer, but in the true tradition of 'mad dogs and Englishmen' I set off in the mid-morning sun with temperatures nearing 40°C in the shade. I ran the gauntlet of three-wheelers, scooters and bicycles and I did my utmost to deter vendors of postcards, handkerchiefs, sunglasses, mangoes and pomegranates together with touts offering houseboat holidays in Kashmir. The constant blare of car horns caused my head to throb; street sweepers routinely displaced thick layers of dust that choked my nostrils and clung to the beads of sweat on my forehead. A young mother, babe in arms, hands outstretched, looked at me pleadingly as I made my way up Janpath, one of the popular tourist centres not far from the commercial heart of New Delhi, towards the venerable five-star Imperial Hotel.

'You are a lucky man.' Turning around, I found a burly Sikh fortuneteller in slow pursuit and not about to give up on his chosen prey. 'Sir, I will tell you everything about your family.'

Little did he know that apart from my teenage daughter I didn't have one.

'And, lucky man, I will tell you how you will make your fortune.'

That I had long since given up worrying about.

In a final attempt to get my attention he appealed to matters of the heart. 'Then let me tell you about your love life.'

Again he was wide of the mark for, according to my operations spreadsheet, the 'love life' column was unlikely to figure on my agenda in the next five months.

Later that morning I invested Rs2 (US5c) and stepped on a machine that blasted out a Bollywood movie hit while calculating one's weight and fortune. After a few seconds a card appeared, declaring, '83kg. You are witty, interesting and intelligent,' with a picture of the Bollywood movie actress Madhuri Dixit on the other side. Well, how could I argue with that!

I would return five and a half months later and weigh myself on the same machine. By then I was '68.5kg' but, in spite of my weight loss, the card still declared,

'You are witty, interesting and intelligent.'

Two frantic days spent in the offices of World Expeditions (India)—a Delhi-based adventure travel company I had helped to establish in 1987—confirmed my belief that nothing was being left to chance. Dates were re-entered in spreadsheets, calculations made as to when fresh supplies of food would be sent and where porters would be available to carry our loads. The staff peppered me with questions.

'Will you arrive at Mudh on 29 or 30 June?'

'How much money should Almas take with him?'

'What is your plan if there is too much snow on the Yamunotri Pass?'

'Where do we send your Inner Line permit?'

'Do you want to take your 'A' frame cotton tent or your old nylon dome tent?'

'Are you sure you don't want chickens?'

'How many bottles of Old Monk rum should we pack?'

And so it went on, with Almas overseeing the almost military-style operation.

My kitbag weighed no more than 10 to 12 kilograms. I had kept my gear to a minimum: one pair of walking pants, one pair of shorts, two long-sleeved cotton shorts (that would be stitched and patched regularly during the trek), changes of underwear and woollen socks, thermal longs and shirt, a fibre-fill jacket, a rain jacket and overpants, a pair of trainers, and a well-worn pair of boots (a back-up pair was left in the office). Added to that was a thermarest, a sleeping bag and my seven-year-old nylon dome tent—that withstood storms, winds, rain and snow for five months—a ski pole, sunglasses and ski goggles, and a medical kit to cover most emergencies. There were also several notebooks stored in heavy duty plastic wallets, a baseball cap donated by my daughter, a neck scarf that could give me a *pukka sahib* image if the occasion warranted, and a range of water bottles for single-malt whisky and Old Monk rum. Perhaps my one true indulgence were my handbooks on the Himalaya. I did not bring any CDs—a conscious decision that I sometimes regretted.

'Is that it for five months?' Almas enquired, somehow believing there could be another kitbag hidden around the corner. But no, that was it and I was later delighted to discover that Almas's kitbag was a wee bit larger than mine.

Almas Khan had grown up in the Himalayan hill resort of Naini Tal about 200 kilometres north-east of Delhi where his adopted father was the chief magistrate. Muslim by birth but subscribing to no particular faith he completed his studies before embarking on a less than illustrious career as a front office manager for a leading hotel chain. After completing an intermediary mountaineering course at Uttarakashi, he was hired as a senior guide with World Expeditions (India). Unlike most educated men of this industry, Almas did not aspire to being an 'adventure travel executive', preferring instead to be in the mountains whenever possible.

Harsh Vardhan, the genial managing director of the company kept a watchful eye on the proceedings. I had known Harsh for years. Stocky and the same 173-centimetre height as me, Harsh was blessed with thick jet-black hair and an ample moustache. He looked younger than his forty-five years and yet he seemed tired and drawn. Several weeks earlier a helicopter that his company owned had crashed during a mountain flight out of Manali in the mountains of Himachal Pradesh. The pilot and his four passengers were killed. There would be a government

enquiry; Harsh would be up to his neck in paperwork, and my plans for him to join me for a few weeks on the trek were looking unlikely. 'If I can possibly join you I will,' was all he could promise. Unfortunately it was not to be.

On the morning of 14 May, we were ready to go. The roof rack of our jeep was piled high with tin trunks, kit bags and canvas tents. It was time to say goodbye. Wandering around the office I shook hands with guides and office staff. Almas and Jeet Chetri, our Nepalese cook, were in fine form. 'Hope they enjoy the office,' Almas sniggered. Jeet remained silent, smiling quietly to himself. Coming from Nepal, he had earned a reputation for being one of the best trekking cooks this side of Kathmandu. He was far more suited to life on the trail than hanging around Delhi.

After driving north for 200 kilometres, we planned to spend our first night at the famous Hindu pilgrimage centre at Rishikesh. The next day we would ascend the mountain road to the sprawling town of Uttarkashi where we would purchase fresh supplies of fruit and vegetables. It would take a further five hours to complete the 107-kilometre drive to Gangotri, with time needed to organise porters before setting off on the trail the following morning.

Leaving Rishikesh before first light we drove alongside the swift, silent current of the Ganges as it emerged from the Himalayan foothills. The plaintive cry of the Great Himalayan barbet and the constant sound of cicadas filled the sultry air. About half an hour after setting out we reached the border of the recently created state of Uttaranchal. Even at this early hour the police controls were in force. The head constable sauntered to my door. 'Checking,' he smiled in case I had not recognised his pivotal role monitoring movements across the state border. 'Yes sir, checking.'

He was looking for illicit supplies of liquor that could be sold for a tidy profit in the hills. He eyed our enormous baggage, the tin trunks, the sacks of food and our kitbags before making an illuminating observation.

'Trekking.'

'Yes.'

'Trekking.'

'Yes.'

And so the mantra was repeated several more times until the head constable accepted that there was more than an even chance that we might actually be going trekking. After searching one of our tin trunks he said, 'Trekking,' once more. Waving us on he remained unaware of my ample supply of Old Monk rum and single-malt whisky at the bottom of my kitbag.

There was no shortage of action on the highway. Jeeps passed on blind corners, packed with a dozen or more family members. Equally crammed buses blasted their horns, lurching around corners as they transported pilgrims by the village load. For most pilgrims this was their first time in the mountains. Judging by their expressions they were daunted by a world so different from their homes spread far and wide across the northern Gangetic Plain. That morning we spotted only a handful of *sadhus*, holy men who have renounced the material world for a life in the mountains. One solitary figure stood by the side of the road, his dreadlocks and body smeared in ashes, his gaunt figure covered only by a saffron-coloured loincloth. He carried a brass begging bowl in one hand and a shoulder bag in the other as he continued his pilgrimage into the twenty-first century.

When not on *sadhu* watch, Almas and I took turns to rate the road signs. These masterpieces of the English language are created in the depths of the offices of the ITBP—the Indo-Tibetan Border Police. No doubt a budding inspector general had spent weeks creating such inspirational one-liners as:

'This is highway, not runway.'

'Peep peep, don't sleep.'

'Road is hilly, don't be silly.'

'Fast won't last.'

'After whisky, driving risky.'

And my favourite ... 'Better Mr Late than Late Mr.'



At Uttarkashi, Jeet quick-footed it to the bazaar to purchase supplies of fresh vegetables, bananas, lychees and ripe mangoes. Within an hour we were negotiating the most spectacular and nerve-racking section of the highway. In places the road was barely large enough for small vehicles to pass. It was white-knuckle country and on more than one occasion I clenched my fists for all I was worth as we veered towards a mighty drop into a huge abyss. The gorges can be up to 600 metres deep where the Bhagarathi River strives to maintain a course that it followed well before the Himalaya was formed.

The remnants of an ancient pilgrim trail were occasionally visible on the far side of the gorge, marking the pilgrims' age-long endeavours to reach the inner Himalaya. Their motivation is entwined with the belief that the Himalaya are the abode of the gods. According to the *Vedas*, written around the tenth century BC, the Himalaya was a playground where the likes of Agni, the god of fire; Surya, the god of the sun; Vago the god of the wind; and Indra, the mighty god of the sky played out the destiny of the world.

For former generations of pilgrims, the trails would have presented considerable challenges, while for the first pilgrims the terrain would have proved all but impossible. Any attempt to ascend the higher reaches of the Bhagarathi Valley would have been fraught with danger. There were no trails to follow through the dense forest bar those made by bears and leopards. The steep walls of the gorges were almost impossible to traverse while the task of clambering over the slippery boulders along the river's edge would have tested the resolve of the most intrepid pilgrim.

Even as recently as fifty years ago, the final walking stage to Gangotri was not for the faint-hearted. Landslides would have been the norm during the heavy rains while man-eating leopards ensured that no pilgrim slept soundly at night. The section just above the confluence of the Jadh Ganga and the Bhagarathi rivers presented a formidable challenge. A pulley bridge swaying to and fro tested the nerve of most. It was not until 1962 that a road bridge was completed—a truly remarkable engineering feat that formed the highest span over any river in the Indian subcontinent. The trail just above the confluence also marked the turnoff point leading north to the Mana Pass into Tibet—the route that the Austrian mountaineer Heinrich Harrer followed to enter Tibet on his *Seven Years in Tibet* epic.

For the majority of pilgrims the bustling town of Gangotri, the largest in the upper Bhagarathi Valley, is as far as they go. During the winter no one except a handful of *sadhus* lives there, but, by early May the population explodes as thousands of pilgrims arrive each day to pay homage to what is the most important tributary of the Ganges. In recent geological times Gangotri was the source of the Ganges. The huge granite walls polished by the constant pounding of the Bhagarathi River at one time marked the site where the river emerged from the Gangotri Glacier. Nowadays the glacier has retreated some 22 kilometres up the valley to Gaumukh; an alarming rate, particularly since the records testify that the glacier has retreated a further 100 metres into the mountains in the last thirty years.

Gangotri marks the second stage of the *Char Dham*, the traditional Hindu pilgrimage to the four sacred sources of the Ganges. From Rishikesh the pilgrims drive to Hanuman Chatti, a ramshackle village that serves as an overnight halt before they commence their trek to Yamunotri, the source of the Yamuna River and one of the main tributaries of the Ganges. Gangotri is next, with a small percentage of pilgrims completing the 22-kilometre hike to Gaumukh, the most important source of the Ganges. The pilgrims then drive for a full day to Gaurikund. After a night at another bustling pilgrim town they undertake a 14-kilometre trek along a paved path to the temple at Kedarnath, a resting place of the Hindu god Shiva. Badrinath marks the fourth and final stage of the pilgrimage. Here, the Hindu god Vishnu is the presiding deity. The temple is located close to the road providing the pilgrims with a quick, convenient opportunity to complete their *darshan* before heading back to the warmth of the Indian Plains.

No amount of horn blowing could hasten our progress along the final stretch of road to Gangotri. Busload upon busload of pilgrims offloaded their possessions onto the road while an armada of taxis and jeeps spewed exhaust fumes into the crisp mountain air. In the congestion, it took an hour or so before we could stop and unload. An instant later four or five porters were unfastening ropes on the roof rack, tossing off bags of vegetables, rice and grain, and lowering tin trunks and jerry cans full of kerosene onto the bitumen. Even before we could say goodbye to our driver, the porters were shouldering our gear and heading to a modest hotel alongside the road. They knew that vacant rooms were as scarce as hen's teeth and were suitably rewarded for their efforts. It was an auspicious arrival.

Before I had managed to take off my boots, Almas and Jeet were off in search of porters to assist us on the first stage of our trek. Judging by appearances most were Nepalese and Jeet would be on the lookout for his most reliable fellow countrymen. Meanwhile, I was in need of exercise. A smell of incense together with the unmistakable stench of urine pervaded the

cobblestone alleyway leading from the market place. Judging by the huge stacks of merchandise, the stall owners anticipated a busy season. Cartloads of woollen pullovers, balaclavas and gloves were ready to be snapped up at the first hint of snow. Stalls were piled high with plastic water bottles of all shapes and sizes in which pilgrims could store the sacred waters from the Ganges. Other stalls displayed brass pots, trinkets medicinal herbs, bottle of oils and jewellery. Fake herbs, fake oils, fake jewellery, fake everything, yet no different from the average street markets found in London, Sydney or Singapore that offer merchandise of questionable origin or dubious benefit.

*Dhabas*, the ubiquitous India cafés, consisting of a row of wooden benches and about fifty plastic chairs, geared up for business. Kettlefuls of tea remained constantly on the boil on roaring kerosene stoves, together with fresh potato cutlets and spicy vegetable pakoras to satisfy the appetite of the ravenous pilgrim. Music stalls with cassette recorders played anything from devotional hymns to the latest Bollywood movie hits at ear-cracking volumes. There were vegetable stalls with fresh supplies of potatoes, carrots, onions, green capsicums and cauliflower, together with cases of over-ripe mangoes on sale at premium prices. Barrel loads of hand-carved walking sticks, soon to become the trusted friend of many a pilgrim, were sold at giveaway prices. At the far end of the alleyway, moneychangers swapped bank notes for small coins that pilgrims would distribute to itinerant beggars. Sitting in an orderly line, the eyes of the beggars followed each pilgrim in the hope of receiving a small donation.

In the early evening I wandered to the temple just above the town. Gangotri is said to be the place where King Bhagarathi undertook meditation in order to attract the mighty Ganga down from the heavens. Just beyond the bazaar is the temple established in the late eighteenth century when the Gurkha General Amir Singh Thapur assumed control over the region. In comparison to the huge bustling mass of humanity at other temples in the Himalaya this one was practically deserted. The Brahmin priests solemnly recited the *pujas* as a slender line of pilgrims filed through the entrance and paid their respects to Gangaji, the goddess of the Ganga, whose statue was located in the inner recesses of the temple. The temple had been open for several weeks following the ceremony of Akshaya-Tritiya in late April and would remain open until the festival of Diwali in October. At that time the resident *sahdus* would carry the statue of the goddess to Mukba, the nearest village some 20 kilometres down the Bhagarathi Valley.

A steady stream of devotees unrolled their beds along the wide wooden verandahs of the *chattis*, the traditional pilgrim shelters. They unpacked their pots and small calico bags of wheat and lentils before preparing a simple meal of chapattis and dhal on their kerosene stoves. On the far side of the river more affluent pilgrims settled in modern multistorey, concrete hotels. For them the pilgrimage combined an adventure in the mountains with time to reflect on their destiny. Clambering down to the *ghats*—the concrete steps leading down to the river—rich and poor alike knelt beside the current and cleansed themselves in the silent waters of the Bhagarathi River.

After a fitful night's sleep we finally set off on the trek. Tying my bootlaces, I was aware that after all the planning and preparation this was it. Five months to go, I reminded myself.

It did not take long to realise that I would not be able to keep up with Almas, at least not for the first month. In spite of all my past trekking experiences I had done very little to prepare for this epic. For those first few hours my limbs ached and my feet were unbelievably sore as I wondered why I had agreed to a 14-kilometre stage on my first day. Plodding along at a snail's pace I cursed Almas. Short, with a torso that would do credit to a featherweight boxer, he strode ahead. All I saw was his red baseball cap bobbing from one side of the trail to the other as he moved past a steady stream of pilgrims.

It wasn't long before I attracted the attention of my fellow trekkers. By the looks of them, most had done as much preparation before the trek as I had. 'Where are you going?' they asked, addressing me as an *angrezi*. Little did they know that I had trekked these mountains many times before. But what could I reply? 'This is the first day of a five-month walk to Kashmir that I will undertake much in the style of a nineteenth-century traveller,' would have caused them to question my sanity.

At the top of a switchback Almas waited for me. Cigarette in hand he was in his element, as if trekking above 3000 metres was his birthright. I struggled on, focusing on having a good night's rest at our first camp, an open meadow alongside the Bhagarathi River known as Bhojbasa.

As we went about establishing our camp we first erected the cook tent—Jeet's *dhaba*—a thick cotton tent that would withstand the worst of the elements. After that Almas and I unpacked the pegs and poles of my vintage nylon dome tent and his 'A' frame tent, his home for the next two months. It felt strange to be trekking again as I inflated my insulated sleeping mat, rolled out my down sleeping bag and tipped all of my gear out of my kitbag and rucksack. In a matter of

minutes I could hear Jeet's kerosene stove purring while the chatter of Nepalese voices receded as the porters headed to a trailside *dhaba* where they would eat and spend the night.

Few words were exchanged that evening. Locked in my own thoughts I wandered down to the banks of the Bhagarathi River while Jeet prepared our first banquet of rice, dhal and vegetables.

That evening the sky was studded with thousands of constellations. At the head of the valley the Bhagarathi peaks glistened in the moonlight while the unmistakable profile of Shivling—the Matterhorn of the Himalaya at 6543 metres—loomed above our next camp at Tabovan. A soft breeze filtering across the juniper bushes was the only sound to disturb the silence in this immortal valley.

The following morning we completed the 8-kilometre stage to Gaumukh. Gaumukh is known literally as 'the Cow's Mouth', for it is here that the river flows out of the huge wall of ice that marks the snout of the Gangotri Glacier. Beyond Gaumukh the trail leads across huge scree slopes and it took several hours of concentrated effort to ascend the terminal moraine on the Gangotri Glacier to idyllic Tabovan. Here I relaxed surrounded by an open meadow that stretched for several kilometres up the valley. It was an unexpected oasis high above the glacial moraine and surrounded by glistening peaks that would have inspired generations of trekkers and holy men. The half a dozen Nepalese porters who had ferried our loads returned to the warmer climes of Gaumukh for a few days.

For the first time since leaving Delhi I began to seriously consider the trek ahead of me. Until this week it had just been a plan on a spreadsheet, but now I spent some time in the seclusion of my tent wondering whether my plans were too ambitious. My mind had not yet come to terms with what lay ahead of me. This is it, I told myself, this is your indulgence, this is what you planned and this is where you are going to be for the next five months. This was my reality and I had better make the best of it. However, it was to take me a few weeks before I could reconcile my ambitions with establishing a day-to-day routine.

It was here at Tabovan that I met the guru Indradev Panda, sitting at the entrance to his cave and looking like a character straight out of the Old Testament. I thought he was somewhere between forty and fifty. It was hard to make a more accurate guess as a flowing black beard covered the lower half of his sunburnt face.

Originally from the state of Maharastra in Central India, Indradev Panda had studied yoga before becoming something of a guru. Later he had also adopted the life of a *sadhu*, renouncing the material world and undertaking pilgrimages to various *dhams*, or sacred sites, in the Himalaya. Five years ago he had trekked to Tabovan where he had maintained a vow of silence for several years. His home now was an underground chamber beneath a huge boulder.

I had Almas to thank for our first meeting. Soon after we had established our camp at Tabovan, Almas had gone in search of Indradev. He had met him on a previous trek and was keen to renew his acquaintance. It did not take long before their conversation turned to my quest to walk to Kashmir. 'Please bring this man to me,' was how Indradev had requested our first meeting.

Slipping on my boots I had headed with Almas across the meadow, resigned to meeting what I thought would be just another holy man. Yet Indradev seemed different. He was profoundly content and during our short stay he patiently explained his theories on life and how he came to be at Tabovan.

I had studied Eastern religion for one of my university courses while studying in England and although I did not profess to have any more than inkling of what Indradev talked about I was familiar with some of the basic concepts. When he talked, for instance, on the wandering and life of the renowned Hindu philosopher Shankara, I impressed Almas with a few pertinent comments. Until now Almas had thought I was just a complete religious cynic. Conversations, with Almas acting as a liberal interpreter, flowed easily, as indeed they should in such a location high above the distractions of the world. At one point I could almost visualise myself living in a cave for a few months of each year, although not to the exclusion of some of life's more mundane pleasures. Indradev frequently threw back his head in laughter at the mention of 'Guru Weare' and my attempts to reconcile my needs—including having Jeet to cook for me—with those of a true mountain recluse.

On the day after our arrival Indradev invited me into his underground chamber. Following him, I squeezed through the narrow entrance and adjusted my eyes to the dim light before acquainting myself with Indradev's home beneath the meadow. The cool air was still, the temperature constant, not unlike being in a large snow cave. On one side was a natural stone platform strewn with bedding that could accommodate up to six people for the night. A small

cooking area had been hewn out of the rock face on which there was a kerosene stove, a half-full rice pot, an earthen vessel filled with water, a tin of ghee, cooking oil, a few potatoes and a packet of Lipton tea donated by a recent visitor. Indradev provided food and shelter to the handful of mostly Indian trekkers who would stay with him for a day or two. He charged no fee, accepting instead offers of food and donations. Any extra contributions he put to one side, as he was keen to construct a *lingam*—a stone statue symbolising the Hindu god Shiva—beside an ice-bound sacred lake 150 metres above the cave.

Indradev welcomed climbing expeditions with all the warmth that he reserved for trekkers. Each season a handful of mountaineers intent on scaling Shivling, Kedar Dome or one of the nearby peaks visited Indradev's cave to seek his blessings. Although he associated the summits with the divine, he seemed content to accept that the climbers' ambitions did not violate the sanctity of the sacred peaks. A well-used ice axe presented by a recent expedition was propped up in an inner recess of his cave.

On the morning of our departure, Almas and I returned for one last visit to the cave. Beckoning me to sit beside him, Indradev Panda handed me some small booklets written by his teacher Pandit Shriram Sharma. The booklets covered a variety of topics ranging from life after death to the purity of sexual union. He asked me one last time to consider staying on. I gently turned the tables and asked him whether he had undertaken the pilgrimage to the famous Amarnath Cave deep in the mountains of Kashmir.

'Even going down to Gangotri interrupts my meditation,' he laughed. 'Take this,' he said, and as a final gesture of friendship presented me with a colour print of his teacher sitting beneath the backdrop of Shivling. I studied it carefully before grasping his hands in mine and saying goodbye. Rolling up the print I packed it carefully in my rucksack. It would remain with me throughout my trek and would be packed into my kitbag when I eventually headed home. It is now hanging on my study wall.

## **CHAPTER 3**

### **The Pilgrim Way**

Like the pilgrims I had watched several days before, the following morning I found myself kneeling alongside the swift, icy current of the Bhagarathi River, to fill my small plastic bottle with water that I would hopefully pour into the sacred lake of Gangabal. As I sat on a boulder alongside the river I saw small chunks of ice float past, broken off from the huge ice wall that forms the snout of the Gangotri Glacier. The ice blocks would soon melt and merge with the countless tributaries that form the mighty Ganges, for millions of Hindu souls the pure stream of life that flows forever. Infinite. Divine.

I was not alone. Several Hindu pilgrims were busy filling water containers that would remain with them long after they returned home. The most devout stripped to their underclothes, drawing a breath before immersing themselves repeatedly in the icy current. Rising above the surface they uttered invocations to the Hindu god Shiva, before drying themselves in the morning sunlight. I felt no need or urge to join them. I am not a Hindu and reserve judgment as to whether this sacred river source can wash away a lifetime's sins. As I watched, I reminded myself that I was an outsider with neither empathy for rituals nor blind faith in Hindu belief or, for that matter, any religion.

Gaumukh is recognised as the sacred source of the Ganges where the icy waters flow from the Gangotri Glacier. In contrast to other important pilgrim sites there is no temple at Gaumukh, just an unobtrusive Hindu shrine. Each morning a *sadhu* dressed only in a loincloth collects the offerings of small coins and sweeps the vicinity of the shrine, invoking the Hindu god Shiva. After performing his *darshan* he returns to meditate in his cave close to the river's edge.

Having descended from Tabovan to Gaumukh at the crack of dawn, I basked in the sun as it returned warmth to my bones. At last I was on my way. I did not need to consult my itinerary as I had already carefully planned the next ten days or so of my trek. In the next day or two I would return to the town of Uttarkashi before heading over the Darwa Pass and following an ancient pilgrim trail to the Yamunotri temple—the sacred source of the Yamuna River, the most important tributary of the Ganges.

Today I would head down the Bhagarathi Valley towards Gangotri. I was not on my own. Already, at 8am, a steady line of pilgrims was passing me intent on reaching Gaumukh. Some had hired riding ponies to get them back to Gangotri by nightfall. They had a long day ahead of them.

The pilgrims represented a spectrum of Indian society. Poor families from rural Rajasthan carried their meagre provisions for the trek on their head. Pitifully thin men in white *dhotis* and women protected from the elements only by colourful yet bedraggled *saris* walked together, anxious not to let anyone out of their sight. They walked in thongs or in bare feet, making only the slightest imprint on the dusty trail. By contrast, prosperous, well-fed families from the Punjab and Gujarat walked at a leisurely pace. A frail elderly woman, possibly the family matriarch, was carried aloft in a *dandy*—a wooden sedan chair—supported by a team of Nepalese porters. The two-day return journey would have cost her around Rs5000 (US\$100), a small fortune by Indian standards. Groups of students from Delhi and Kolkata were experiencing the Himalaya for the first time. Wearing designer jeans and sunglasses, they carried their sleeping bags and assortment of clothing strapped on top of large poorly fitting rucksacks. Having renounced worldly possessions, the *sadhus* wore a simple loincloth and carried just a woollen blanket to protect themselves from the sub-zero overnight temperatures. A trickle of foreigners, intent on discovering the divine, mingled with the pilgrims. I wondered what they would discover and whether it would have any lasting impact on their life once they returned home.

There is no one simple reason to explain the pilgrims' progress. In a country as diverse as India, why should there be? For some the trek is motivated by a sense of tradition, of submitting to family pressure as much as religious belief. For the young the need for adventure matches the quest for spiritual wellbeing.

A kilometre down the trail the sound of raised voices shattered the morning air. The dust was literally flying as tin trunks and sacks of food were slung onto waiting mules. The owner of the tea stall was making one last plea to an official, but it fell on deaf ears. He had to pay his annual

rent of Rs25000 (US\$500) before he could resume business. The Forest Department official was just doing his duty. 'How am I to make a living?' the tea stall owner wailed, knowing that he might as well save his breath. With a plate of rice and dhal costing Rs30 (US\$60c), a cup of tea Rs5 (US\$10c) and an overnight stay in his tent Rs100 (US\$2), it was difficult to appreciate how he could ever make a living.

While the rules may seem a little draconian, they have been strictly enforced in the last few years as part of the plan to preserve the fragile mountain environment of the upper Bhagarathi Valley. The last time I trekked to Gaumukh was in 1996. At the time I was shocked by the dire need for environmental controls. The constant use of wood for cooking and heating had taken its toll on the nearby hillside, almost denuded of forest. Garbage littered the trail and toilet facilities were non-existent. Nowadays the tea stall owners must either use kerosene or LPG containers for cooking and heating and are no longer permitted to cut saplings to construct their shelters. A national park fee of Rs25 (US\$50c) for Indians and Rs100 (US\$2) for foreigners is collected at a tollbooth just above Gangotri in order to help with maintenance and garbage removal.

Endangered wildlife is re-appearing as a result. On our way up, Almas and I spotted a large herd of blue sheep, or *bharal*, grazing just above Bhojbasa. On our return we saw barking deer slipping through a birch grove on the far side of the valley. Snow leopards have also been sighted, although during the summer they are only to be found on the highest ridges. These environmental improvements have come about mainly as a result of the work of non-government organisations. For Dr Harshvanti Bisht, the last decade has been devoted to raising funds and promoting awareness of the dangers facing the Bhagarathi Valley. I had met 'Harsh', as she wishes to be called, a couple of years before in Uttarkashi. An academic by profession, a mountaineer by calling and a committed environmentalist she is supported by the Institute of Himalayan Environment, founded by the Indian freedom fighter G. M. Pant. I had already noticed her work about halfway between Gangotri and Gaumukh where around a thousand spruce, silver birch and cedar have been planted in the last few years. The Himalayan Trust and the Gangotri Conservation Foundation have also made a substantial contribution. The Himalayan Trust is headed by the renowned Indian mountaineer M. S. Kolhi and has been instrumental in drawing the pilgrims' attention to the fragile environment. It has initiated reforestation programs, constructed toilet blocks and also funded an incinerator just outside of Gangotri to dispose of the litter and garbage. The Trust will eventually expand its efforts to other pilgrimage centres also in dire need of attention.

Later that afternoon, resting at a *dhaba*, I focused on the many 6000-metre summits bathed in sunlight that enclosed the broad glacial valley. Between the extensive scree slopes, fine stands of conifers swept down to the riverbank while pairs of lammergeier—the huge Himalayan vulture—soared above the scant alpine pastures in search of prey. It had been a satisfying day and I looked forward to camping in Chirbasa, a secluded meadow set amid conifers about 9 kilometres above Gangotri.

Jeet had already gone ahead, and by the time Almas and I arrived at Chirbasa, he had secured the guy ropes of his cook tent in the shade of the conifers. This was Jeet's *dhaba* that could easily accommodate him and at least half a dozen porters. Jeet was in business as soon as he arranged his assortment of pots and pans, herbs and spices in the vicinity of the kerosene stove. Now in his late thirties, he had travelled from Nepal to India about fifteen years ago and had worked his way up the ranks from cook's assistant to his present role as a fully fledged trekking cook. Short and wiry with a cheerful grin he was a completely dependable trekking companion.

That evening I voiced my concerns about the next few days. After my initial taste of the hills I had serious reservations about walking back down the 90 kilometres of highway to Uttarkashi. As Almas and Jeet sipped their tea, I informed them of my change in plans. If this tainted the purity of my traverse to Kashmir, so be it. I was, however, keen to complete a 20-kilometre stage of the ancient pilgrim trail below Gangotri. Of particular interest was the route the pilgrims followed at the beginning and end of each season when they carried a statue of Ganga Ji to and from the village of Mukba.

Almas, forever easy going, agreed with my revised plan. After a pause he suggested that Jeet should go on a day ahead of us to Uttarkashi. It was a perfect solution. We would all set off the following morning to Gangotri. From there, Jeet would take all of our baggage back to Uttarkashi by bus, leaving Almas and I to continue on foot. This would entail walking along the 12-kilometre stretch of road to the Lanka Bridge before we diverted along the foot trail to Mukba. Almas and I could then visit the temple where the statue of Ganga Ji is housed during the winter before rejoining the road to Uttarkashi at the village of Dharoli. 'We will just carry our sleeping bags, and catch an early morning bus to Uttarkashi the next day. One night in Uttarkashi and we can start trekking again,' concluded Almas. So that was our plan for the next few days.

Setting off at a brisk pace we were back in Gangotri by mid-morning. Without so much as a second cup of tea, Jeet had packed our gear onto a waiting bus even though it was not due to leave for an hour.

‘See you in Uttarkashi.’ With that, Almas and I set off along the road to the Lanka Bridge. We set a good pace and completed the 10-kilometre stage to the tea stalls at Bhaironghati in an hour and a half. ‘Not bad for an old timer,’ I remarked, although my comment was lost on Almas who was more interested in lunch.

Soon after crossing the Lanka Bridge, Almas and I diverted along the foot trail to Mukba. It was a relief to be off the highway for a few hours at least. It was now midday, the temperatures were unseasonably hot and shade was at a premium. Few words were spoken as we headed down the trail. Nearing the sprawling village, we were accompanied by a group of children to a newly constructed white temple. As the statue of Ganga Ji was at present in Gangotri I only made a cursory inspection while the children pushed and shoved behind me. For a moment I nearly lost my patience with one particularly vocal ragamuffin who was intent on sticking his grubby hands into the outside pockets of my rucksack.

By the time we crossed the suspension bridge over the Bhagarathi River to rejoin the highway I was hot, tired and cranky. My feet were also red and swollen. ‘I should never have worn my boots,’ I complained to Almas and anyone else unfortunate enough to be in earshot. Fortunately, there were a couple of spare rooms at the only halfway decent hotel at Dharoli. The rooms came complete with a wooden bed covered by a threadbare cotton sheet and a bathroom with a dripping tap that functioned as a cold shower. It was good enough for me.

While any other sane trekking duo would have called it a day by then, Almas had other ideas. ‘Why don’t we go down to Harsil?’ It was, after all, only 5 kilometres down the valley.

‘Why not?’ I answered in jest.

The fact that we had covered the best part of 30 kilometres already that day didn’t seem to figure in his reasoning, but we went all the same.

Harsil is the former home of Raja Wilson who is said to have inspired Kipling’s novel *The Man Who Would be King*. Wilson was a legend in the Bhagarathi Valley. Born in Yorkshire, he travelled to India to seek his fortune in the early 1840s before ‘going native’ and settling in the hills close to Harsil. He is credited with having introduced the cultivation of potatoes and also apple orchards to the region, as well as building the first bridge over the gorge now spanned by the Lanka Bridge. Wilson married into a local family and built what could almost be described as a palace. He made his fortune by logging, coming up with the idea—now adopted in so many other remote regions of the Himalaya—of floating the timber down the river to the lucrative markets of northern India.

By all accounts ‘Wilson Palace’ was impressive. Built on a palatial scale, the two-storey mansion was constructed from alternate layers of deodar and dry stone and was one of the finest examples of pahari architecture, the traditional hill style of construction in the Himalayan foothills. From early photographs, you can appreciate the ornately carved pillars that supported the second-storey verandah while the massive carved doors were equally impressive. Sadly, this remnant from a bygone era was destroyed by fire in 1995, a tragic loss. In its place the Forest Department built modest offices and quarters for their men. ‘It was something to see. Believe me, sir, it was something to see,’ a villager remarked before Almas and I made our way back to Dharoli in the rapidly fading light.

The following morning Almas and I caught the first bus back to Uttarkashi. I had no inclination to stay in the congested town any longer than necessary. Jeet had already purchased fresh supplies of fruit and vegetables while our local trekking agent had arranged porters for the next stage of the trek. This part of the route intrigued me as it included the Yamunotri Pass, the only pass on my entire trek that I had not been over before.

‘Success Lies in Courage’ read the sign at the entrance to the Nehru Mountaineering Institute situated in the Chir forest above the main town. The centre had been built to train a new generation of Indian mountaineers, including Almas who had completed his intermediate mountaineering course there over a decade ago. Our visit was a chance for Almas to meet with his former instructor, Chowang Norbu. A guide from Darjeeling, Norbu had been an instructor at the Institute for seventeen years. He was one of the true band of dependable and reliable ‘Sherpas’ that are synonymous with Himalayan mountaineering. According to the calendar on his desk, he spent as little time as possible in Uttarkashi: for most of his year he worked as an instructor on the mountaineering training courses or was out undertaking expeditions with fellow instructors.

Sitting with him in the coffee shop, we watched as a team of young Indian female students shifted their gear in preparation for an attempt on Kedar Dome (not far from Tabovan). Any problem with the Yamunotri Pass?' I asked.

'Not for you,' Norbu laughed, before giving me a rough description of the route leading to the pass and some advice about the porters. Almas and I followed him into the principal's office where we studied a large-scale ordinance survey map of the Uttarkashi region.

As we walked back to town Almas pointed out the shortcuts that he and his fellow students used to take on their evening forays in search of *jeelabis*, sticky Indian sweets, in the bazaar. He lamented that he would like to be an instructor but accepted the fact that vacancies were few and selection procedures highly competitive. 'Anyhow, being a trek leader has its moments,' he confided before reminding me that on 6 June 2003 he would have been on the company payroll for ten years. With that off his chest, he headed down with me to a local *dhaba* for our daily banquet of rice and dhal.

After lunch I wandered further down to Uttarkashi's one and only Internet café. I checked my emails for the last time for two months before sending my daughter a special message. Today, 22 May 2003, was her birthday. She was fourteen years old and 100 per cent a teenager—one with little interest in coming to India: 'There are too many chillis in the food and, anyway, just because my name is India that doesn't mean I have to go there!' In a way that was a disappointment. Both her mother and I had encouraged her to take an interest in the Himalaya and in particular Kashmir. I had met her mother in 1983 while she was trekking and after an extended friendship India was born in 1989. When India was two her mother and I separately but nonetheless concertedly tried to encourage her to take an interest in living under canvas. To date this had been to no avail. Like other teenagers India had other interests—music, horse riding and even boys!

Her attitude caused me to reflect on my own childhood when I was her age. As a teenager I had had no interest whatsoever in the outdoors and would find any excuse—even doing my homework—to avoid accompanying my parents on their Sunday afternoon walk from our home in South East London.

An only child like me, I wondered how much my daughter needed her father. I often wondered what impact my many extended visits to the Himalaya had on our relationship. Indeed, on my return to Australia it would take a few weeks to re-establish our rapport.

As I returned to the hotel, I noticed a group of *sadhus* congregating on the ghats alongside the Bhagarathi River. All was not at peace in their world for, according to them after years of protest the 'spirit of the Ganges was about to be violated'. Less than 50 kilometres down the valley, the waters of the river flowed into the newly constructed megadam at the town of Tehri. The dam had been designed to satisfy the demand for power in Uttar Pradesh and the adjoining states in northern India, but it had come at an environmental cost. Demonstrations had been staged over the past decade and I had often been delayed as groups of protesters blocked the bridge at the entrance to the town. The protests were to no avail and appeals to the courts on the basis that the dam was located in one of the most seismically sensitive regions of the Himalaya also failed. The waters of the mighty Ganges were now harnessed and the historic township of Tehri was about to be submerged.

Slipping out of Uttarkashi at first light, I was relieved to be heading for the hills again. In two days we would ascend to the serene lake of Dodi Tal before crossing the first pass, the Darwa Pass to Hanuman Chatti and the Hindu temple at Yamunotri. The tranquillity of the early morning was broken by a troupe of rhesus monkeys chattering excitedly as a procession of about forty men drew near. The men looked ahead with only an occasional glance sideways, the forerunners carrying aloft a corpse. There was no outpouring of grief. From beneath a white sheet, the foot of an old man protruded from the stretcher. The passage of life and death is sudden in the hills. The man had died the previous evening. In an hour or two he would be cremated and his ashes would float down the Bhagarathri River—although they might ebb and swirl in the new dam—before eventually floating into the Ganges.

Not long after the funeral procession had passed, a jeep of questionable repair drove by. While I had elected to walk from Uttarkashi, Almas and Jeet had had other ideas. Suitably composed, they sat regally in the front seats while in the back of the jeep a new team of six porters studied me with interest. By the time I reached the flyblown *dhabas* at the end of the road, all except Almas had set off on the trail.

After two hours in slow pursuit, Almas and I approached the thirty slate-roofed farmhouses that constituted the village of Agoda. The porters were resting; their loose-fitting cotton shirts drenched in sweat as the daytime temperatures soared into the high twenties. Just above the village we established our camp in a small clearing shaded by a huge ancient oak tree. Across



the valley, luxuriant stands of oak, cedar, hazel and beech were interspersed with the fading red blooms of the *Rhododendron arboreum*—the buran—the most common of the Himalayan varieties. In the forest the incessant ‘mee-ou, mee-ou’ of the distinctly coloured Great Himalayan barbet, heralded the coming of the monsoon. After my airless room in Uttarkashi, I looked forward to sleeping in my tent again. Later from the confines of my tent I heard the distinctive call of the *kakor*, or barking deer, deep in the forest. There was also an occasional hoot from an owl that I imagined was perched on a nearby oak tree. Only the sound of Jeet snoring in his tent interrupted my attempts to sleep on that wonderously still night.

The trek to Dodi Tal is a popular trail for Indian students experiencing their first taste of the hills. Soon after breaking camp the next morning we reached a lodge where students from a wealthy school in Delhi were enjoying a hearty breakfast. Judging by the tone of the conversation, the trek had surpassed the students’ expectations. Some had even reached the Darwa Pass, a few hours’ hike beyond the lake, a commendable effort for those who follow a city routine. In an adjacent field, children of a more tender age had been working in the fields since dawn. There was no exchange between the two groups, between the urban privileged and rural poor. Both got on with their lives seemingly unaware of the others’ existence.

By early afternoon, rolls of thunder echoed down the valley. Almas and I quickened our pace, keen to reach Dodi Tal before the onset of the heavy rains. We were in luck, making it to one of the *dhabas* just as the raindrops began to churn the surface of the lake. Knowing that Jeet and our porters would have taken shelter in the forest, we settled in for the afternoon.

Markesh, a young boy about the age of my daughter, was managing the tea stall while his father was back in Agoda for a few days. ‘A few years ago,’ he explained, ‘there were a dozen *dhabas*, but now the Forest Department charge us Rs5000 (US\$100) for the season and so there are only two of us left.’ I calculated that even with a bumper day of charging Rs5 (US10c) for tea he would have to sell plenty simply to break even let alone make a profit.

Markesh was also in the know about the trout. ‘The fishing inspector is away for a few days, let me catch you fish?’ he grinned as he prepared to get his tackle. It was an offer I could not refuse although, as it turned out, the fish were not very obliging. It did not surprise me. A few years before when I had camped at Dodi Tal, the fishing inspector had been in attendance. However, not far from the ‘Fishing is not permitted’ sign a group of Indian trekkers were trying their hand. I had asked the inspector why he permitted such a flagrant violation of the rules. ‘Well, I have never seen any of them ever catch a fish so as far as I am concerned they are happy, the fish are happy and I am also happy.’ It was hard to argue with such compelling logic.

It was late afternoon before the storm passed and the porters straggled around to our camp on the far side of the lake. We were not alone. As the storm cleared, a herd of buffalo ambled down to graze on the lush grass alongside the lake. They were tended by Gujars: shepherds who migrate from their winter grazing areas in the vicinity of Dehra Dun each spring. During the short summer they supply the villages in the vicinity of Agoda with milk, curd and ghee. Since my earliest days in Kashmir I had been familiar with their lifestyle. Muslims, who settled in the foothills about 200 years ago, their early history is uncertain. Some maintain that the Gujar’s ancestors originally came from Central Asia, crossing the Pamirs and the Hindu Kush before eventually settling northern India. Nowadays the Gujar are found across the foothills in both Pakistan and India. As far as I knew Dodi Tal was about as far to the east as they came. In the forthcoming months I would encounter many other Gujar families, notably in the Kullu Valley and later on in my trek when I reached Kashmir.

Dodi Tal is not more than a kilometre in circumference. Bright yellow march marigolds thrive along the banks, while the constant ‘plop’ in the water is a sure indication of the presence of the many ‘uncatchable’ trout. On the east bank of the lake is a small temple dedicated to Ganesh, the elephant-like god, who lived in the vicinity of the lake. *Dodi* means nose and legend has it that this is where Ganesh acquired his elephant feature. One day he was told by his mother to guard the house and on no account open the door to strangers. While his mother was away, Ganesh’s father appeared but Ganesh did not recognise him. At this, his father became very angry and decided to teach Ganesh a lesson by decapitating him! When she discovered this on her return, Ganesh’s mother was distraught so, to make amends, the father vowed that Ganesh would be brought back to life and would take the head of the next animal to appear, which just happened to be an elephant.

Ringling the large brass bell, I announced to anyone within earshot that I was about to enter the temple. Although the local priest and caretaker were away, the sturdy wooden door into the temple was unlocked and, pushing the door ajar, I entered a compound where statues of Nandi the bull, Ganesh, as well as Ganesh’s parents Shiva and Parvati guarded the entrance to an inner chamber. Until a generation ago it would have been a sanctuary for pilgrims, a place for shelter as they made their way over the mountain trails from Yamunotri to Uttarkashi before a road connected the main pilgrim centres. Nowadays only a handful of pilgrims visit the temple,

which is gradually falling into disrepair. Trekkers would make some contributions towards its upkeep, although some would be more generous than others.

'A camping fee of Rs100! Is this true?'

There were no 'hello, how are you' pleasantries. These two young Israeli trekkers had only one priority: to check whether the forest guard was within his rights to charge a fee. As I was the only foreigner camping at the lake they had headed straight to my tent. Explaining that the guard had already charged us the same amount for each of our tents, I assured them that Rs100 was the going rate.

'But we have no spare money.'

Given that Rs100 is a little over \$US2, it would have been easy to brand them as cheapskates and I was not at first sympathetic towards the intrepid twosome's misfortune. However, then I remembered the early days when I was trekking and had felt the need to conserve every rupee. So, taking pity on them, I offered them tea as they outlined their plans.

'Do you know the trail to Hanuman Chatti?'

'Sure do,' I said, pointing to the trail heading to the Darwa Pass.

'Will it take two days?'

'Is it a good trail?'

'Can we get food?'

'What time does the bus leave Hanuman Chatti?'

I felt like a tour guide hit by a barrage of questions. Doing my best to oblige, I explained the route. I even suggested that they come with me the next morning to the top of the pass so I could point out the way down to Hanuman Chatti. But it was not to be. The following morning I was informed that they had left early and headed back to Uttarkashi ... without paying their camp fee!

'We have a problem.' There was something on Ram Bahadur's mind; as the head porter he was keen to take control of any problems with his charges. In his late thirties he was typical of that nuggety breed of Nepalese worker who travels to the Indian Himalaya each year in search of employment. Slight of build and with not an ounce of fat on his strong wiry body Bahadur was ideally suited to the hills. Dressed in a wellworn cotton shirt and baggy pants a size too big for him he was game for anything. He was a seasoned operator and was uncomfortable with some of the team that his office in Uttarkashi had sent with him. Swapping from Hindi to Nepali to a smattering of English, he made his concerns clear. He had no reservations about his three fellow countrymen but insisted that the two local porters from Uttarkashi were not up to it.

'They can't carry loads,' he said; they were a burden on the other porters. Without mincing his words, Bahadur insisted that the twosome would not make it over the demanding terrain that we had to cross in a week's time. After lighting a *bedi*, Bahadur considered his plan. He wanted to return to Uttarkashi that afternoon, hire two replacements and take the bus around to Hanuman Chatti where he would meet us in a couple of days' time.

'Have you discussed this with them?' Almas asked. Bahadur shook his head. It was his decision and without further ado he set off, leaving a feeling of suspicion and unease among not two but all five of our porters.

The Darwa Pass, at 4150 metres, is not high by Himalayan standards. From Dodi Tal it is no more than a two-hour ascent. On a clear day the views are spectacular, extending south-east across the Gangotri Range to the distinctive twin peaks of Nanda Devi. However, at this time of year a heat haze covers all but the closest of the peaks. Even so, the view of the impressive summit of Banderpunch and the Swargarohini peaks to the north were more than adequate compensation for the morning's efforts.

By the time our porters reached the pass dark clouds were forming. By my reckoning we were going to be in for a soaking. Wasting little time, we headed along the grassy ridge, occasionally slipping on the juniper roots that were still covered by the previous night's snow. Just as Bahadur had predicted, the two local porters lagged behind even though they carried the lightest loads.

Without warning, a huge clap of thunder shook the ground. The next minute hail the size of ball bearings fell out of the sky. The storm shouldn't last I told myself as the hail pounded my ear

lobes. I was wrong. Slithering down an ill-defined trail I considered our options. There was only one—we had to get down. Through the swirling cloud I could see a Gujar camp way down the valley. ‘That will do,’ I volunteered.

‘Yep,’ replied Almas laconically.

We were in the midst of an electric storm the likes of which I had never experienced before. After a ten-minute lull, the hailstorm intensified, driving into my face as I tugged the hood of my waterproof jacket over my head. The porters followed, miserable and yet resigned to a further hour of cold and discomfort. That hour turned out to be three.

We needed to find a way down a rocky cliff about 50-metres high. At first glance, it did not lend itself to an easy descent but, spying a possible gully, I decided to give it a go. ‘I’ll go first and signal if it’s OK for the porters.’

By now I was wringing wet and my hands were frozen as I searched for handholds. Reaching the muddy gully, I slipped slowly but surely down on my backside to a deep patch of snow at the base of the cliff. Looking up, it didn’t appear steep but I suspected it could prove too much for the laden porters. I was right. Almas told me later that, after watching me, he knew he would have to find another place to descend.

Twenty minutes later I reached the Gujar camp. To my disappointment, I discovered it was just a series of straw shelters that had partially collapsed under the heavy winter snows. The first priority was to light a fire so that we could start to dry out. My matches were damp but lightable, or so I thought until one after another they broke off without so much as a flicker of light. As I cursed, I failed to notice that the clouds were beginning to break. A patch of blue sky appeared to the north and within ten minutes the sun appeared. I stripped off my rain jacket and sodden thermal vest, flapping my arms above my head to get warm. Feeling more comfortable, I started to grow concerned about how long it would take for Almas, Jeet and the porters to join me.

At last I picked out a flash of red on the mountainside. It was Jeet with one of the porters on their way down. Although they were some way off, I was relieved that they were safe. As I scanned the mountainside for the rest of the party, an elderly shepherd appeared out of nowhere. He and his family were camped in the birch forest just below the clearing and had come up to see what was going on. Two of the Gujar’s sons followed and within minutes a handful of twigs had been gathered and a roaring fire was underway. When the porters and Almas finally reached camp they dropped their loads and slumped on their haunches beside the fire, relieved that the day was over. The storm had lasted five hours.

‘They thought they were going to die up there,’ offered Almas. I nodded as he related his efforts to get the porters to safety. ‘I saw your route and decided to give it away.’

‘Did you see me after that?’

‘No, but I knew where you would go.’

For me it was a timely reminder that I had responsibilities to the porters. While I had set out on a five-month adventure, the porters were along because they needed to make a living. They needed the money. To think otherwise would be an injustice.

That night I stretched out in my sleeping bag glad that the day was over without any major mishap. Yet I was worried. If this had been the first and one of the easiest passes, what surprises were lying in store during the months ahead?

The following morning we dried out our clothes and relaxed in the bright morning sunlight. The grass was alive with insects, the wildflowers dripped with moisture. The warm sun on my arms and face tempted me to strip off my shirt and bask in the sun while my sodden clothes dried on a nearby boulder. There was no need to rush. The Gujar’s had assured us that we could reach Hanuman Chatti in three hours and their estimate was spot on. Heading through mixed oak and rhododendron forest, it did not take long to reach the fields of the highest settlement. An hour later we completed the steep descent to the ramshackle bazaar of Hanuman Chatti. Ram Bahadur was there to meet us with three new Nepalese porters but he did not have to sack the local porters. They had had enough and held no ill feelings when Almas paid them out later that afternoon.

For most pilgrims Hanuman Chatti marks the initial stage of the *Char Dham*, the first of the pilgrimages to the four recognised sources of the Ganges. In recent years the road has been extended a further 6 kilometres into the mountains to the village of Janku Chatti and Hanuman Chatti is now practically deserted. The busloads of pilgrims stop only for as long as it takes to hire one of the waiting jeeps, even if the cost strains the budget.

Although pilgrims traditionally gained merit by walking from one source of the Ganges to the next, the modern pilgrim seems intent on spending as little time as possible in the mountains. For them it is an alien land where temperatures often drop to freezing and where snowstorms are not infrequent. It is little wonder that most want nothing more than to complete their darshan and move on. So far the *Char Dham* pilgrimage does not reek of crass commercialisation—I haven't seen the 'I've done the *Char Dham*' T-shirt. Yet the tight itineraries leave a lingering suspicion that, for many, the journey is undertaken with little chance of discovering a sense of the divine that only the Himalaya can offer.

Late that afternoon, a couple of policemen visited our camp located about half a kilometre above the main bazaar. I suspected harassment of a financial kind until Almas explained that they were just registering the details of all the pilgrims, and that included me. Nowadays, the Uttaranchal government is taking no chances of possible terrorist infiltration. It was a telling reminder that no one can consider oneself totally safe, even when undertaking a pilgrimage.

I awoke to a dawn chorus of jeep engines revving up for their daily excursions to Janku Chatti. Almas and I set off, avoiding the road whenever possible. The former pilgrim trail is still in place as far as Phul Chatti, about halfway to Janku Chatti but nowadays the place is deserted and the traditional *chattis* are securely locked. All that is left are memories of a bygone time when the pilgrimage fully tested the resolve of the devotees.

By mid-morning Almas and I reached Janku Chatti. The pilgrim season was in full swing. The series of shanty huts and hastily erected canvas tents were abuzz with activity as jeep load after jeep load of pilgrims prepared for the walk to the Yamunotri temple.

'Sir, Yamunotri, is a long walk. You want horse?' A mule attendant thrust the mule's reins into my hands. The attendants wouldn't give up and it was only when they were distracted by a more likely prospect that I was able to take refuge in a *dhaba* above the trail. I watched as porters hung back from the melee. Mostly outsiders, they adopted an almost philosophical approach to the day's proceedings. After several hours of waiting, they might be hired to carry a frail old lady or a child in a wicker basket held by straps on their incredibly strong shoulders. Or they might become part of a team supporting a *dandy*, the wooden platform on which wealthy pilgrims are carried aloft along the switchbacks to the Yamunotri temple.

From my vantage point above the trail, I watched as the pilgrims set off on their adventure. Some of the men wore city shoes with business shirts and trousers; others were in shorts and singlets designed for more athletic figures. Women hitched their *saris* above their ankles, revealing newly acquired pairs of trainers, while a younger generation wore jeans and T-shirts. All were inadequately prepared for any sudden change in the weather. Yet is this not the case in many mountain regions of the world? I don't know how many times I have seen walkers wearing the same inappropriate gear while walking to the summit of Kosciuszko, at 2228 metres the highest peak in Australia and located in a region renowned for rapid changes of weather.

For the Indian pilgrim on their first trek in the Himalaya, the trek to Yamunotri (3185 metres) is a test of their resolve. From Janku Chatti (2650 metres) they endure what equates to an ascent of over 500 metres in the space of 12 kilometres. It is a steep ascent for a first day's hike in the Himalaya but most will take it in their stride, chanting mantras of '*Jai Mantra Ji*'—Victory to the Mother Goddess—to encourage flagging souls to ascend the switchbacks to even greater heights.

As I began my own ascent, I soon found that in places the trail was only wide enough for a single line of pilgrims. A queue formed with as many as fifty waiting each time a pilgrim took a rest. Yet the need to keep moving to reach Yamunotri and return to Janku Chatti by nightfall was uppermost in their minds. There were, of course, times during that morning when I felt less than euphoric. The close proximity of the mule attendants, some of whom had not washed since the beginning of the season; the constant pushing and shoving of younger pilgrims hell bent on exhausting themselves by the time they reached the next switchback; the lingering stench of urine and the constant need for the pilgrims to clear their throats at every opportunity were all things I found hard to accept. Despite it all, however, being part of this line of humanity trekking well beyond its comfort zone instilled a sense of wonder and wellbeing in me that I can still recall.

Rounding the final switchback, the Yamunotri temple was a welcome sight. At first the temple and the adjoining complex of concrete buildings appeared dwarfed by the huge Himalayan backdrop. To the north an amphitheatre of snowy peaks rose high above the valley floor. The meltwater of hanging glaciers formed rivulets that seeped and plunged over the rugged cliffs to the alpine meadows. Most of the pilgrims focused their attention on an impressive waterfall that cascades for hundreds of metres down to the vicinity of the temple. The water flows from an ice-bound lake considered to be the true source of the Yamuna River. For the vast majority of

pilgrims the Yamunotri temple is as far as they need to go. Only the most devout set out to reach the lake and even then not until far later in the season when the snows have melted off the precipitous trail.

Several hundred pilgrims packed into the narrow ramshackle bazaar just below the temple. Tea and platefuls of samosas and vegetable cutlets were the order of the morning as they prepared themselves for their *darshan*. Plucking up courage, they immersed themselves in the icy stream flowing from the waterfall. Then, after changing into their spotlessly clean white *dhotis*, they basked in the sun before ascending the small flight of concrete steps to the entrance of the temple. Once inside they sought the blessing of Brahmin priests, mindful that the first stage of their pilgrimage was almost complete.

That evening we camped high above the temple. I gazed across the wooded ridges and alpine slopes that stretched as far as the Darwa Pass. A thousand metres below, the headlights of the jeeps were clearly visible as they slowly manoeuvred their way back down to Hanuman Chatti. I reflected that in less than a month those pilgrims would have returned home. In contrast, I still had many months ahead of me before I reached Kashmir.

## **CHAPTER 4**

### **A Summer Ramble in the Himalaya**

I first discovered *A Summer Ramble in the Himalaya* long before I planned my trek to Kashmir. One W. W. Wilson, none other than the Raja Wilson of Harsil, edited the account comprising the notes compiled by an anonymous British sportsman—‘the Summer Rambler’—on a five-month trek from Mussoorie to Kashmir in 1860. The account is packed with fascinating notes on the life and times in the hills and, according to its preface, ‘it is not dull on any single page’. W. W. Wilson accompanied the Summer Rambler on the first stages of the trek that headed from Mussoorie across the wooded ridges to Gangotri, before leaving the sportsman to his own devices to trek across Kinnaur, Spiti and Ladakh in search of game. Five months later our Summer Rambler completed his trek in Kashmir where, like most Europeans of the time, he was lavishly entertained by the Maharajah.

There is little doubt that the Summer Rambler exhibited a true love of the mountains. In the villages few details escape his attention, from the crops grown and sold to the supposedly dubious morals of the young women. Beyond the settlements he is in his element. With rifle in hand and accompanied only by his faithful *shikari*, or wildlife guide, he treks for hours up steep forested ravines and across snow-bound ridges in search of game. At night he often abandons the comfort of his tent, sleeping on the ground wrapped in just a woollen blanket as he lies in wait for ibex. At other times he does not exactly endear himself to the modern reader. His account of shooting a harmless brown bear in the presence of her cubs may not have been completely acceptable even in his day.

In accordance with the traditions of the time our Summer Rambler did not travel lightly, often employing forty or fifty porters. However, their contributions were duly acknowledged throughout his remarkable journey. Standing at 5300 metres on the crest of the pass linking Gangotri and Kinnaur, he comments that many of the porters complained of severe headaches. ‘I had partaken of a glass of brandy and some cold tea and biscuit, and felt nothing unusual except the cold; but no doubt there is a great difference crossing a pass with only a stick to carry and having a load on one’s back.’ I could not agree more.

After following the pilgrim trails I looked forward to appreciating something of the Summer Rambler’s life in the hills. During the next two weeks I would hopefully traverse two snow-bound passes. Traversing the Yamunotri Pass (4780 metres) would put me within a stage or two of the alpine meadow of Har ki Dun, set beneath the soaring Swargarohini peaks. After a rest day I would then trek through a series of Hindu villages to the state border of Uttaranchal and Himachal Pradesh along trails leading north over the Rupin Pass to Kinnaur and the borderlands of Tibet.

My trek had not gone completely to plan. The problems had begun soon after we left the Yamunotri temple: Ram Bahadur had decided to take a short cut and in no time we were well and truly lost. For the best part of three hours we struggled across a thickly wooded ravine in search of a trail. ‘It’s a bloody monkey trail,’ muttered Almas as we swung from one sapling to the next—I was still extracting splinters a couple of weeks’ later—while experiencing the dubious delight of clinging to clumps of tussock as we forged a route across steep, exposed gullies. For the porters, with their unwieldy loads, this was hell. A fast and furious stream of Nepalese phrases that would not grace the Royal Palace in Kathmandu echoed off the surrounding mountains. When at last we emerged into a clearing and discovered the established trail we were too tired to go any further. Camping atop a grassy knoll we reasoned that the afternoon had been about as hard as it could get. We were wrong.

Trying to locate footholds and handholds as we negotiated a rocky outcrop was not how I had envisaged starting the following morning. By now Almas had little confidence in Bahadur’s sense of direction but nonetheless accepted that our trusted guide had been over the pass before and therefore knew the way. Several hours later, as Bahadur headed up a steep snow slope, Almas drew ahead sensing that we were in striking distance of the Yamunotri Pass. It was not to be. Even from my vantage point I could see Almas standing with his hands firmly on his hips. Instead of waving back he stood motionless. There was no pass. On the far side of the crest was a near vertical drop for hundreds of metres. It was time for Almas to take charge.

‘We should descend to the snow field where we rested an hour ago and camp.’

We had no choice. Shouldering our loads we retreated down the snow slope. Almas was upset, bemoaning to anyone within earshot that he was less than happy with our local guide.

Ram Bahadur was crestfallen. Before we knew it he had commandeered his most reliable countryman and was heading off, determined to locate the pass. Back at camp I remained silent. We had to locate the Yamunotri Pass. I even considered how many days we could afford to lose rather than turn back and take a lowland route that would add at least a week to my already tight itinerary. Just as I wondered whether I was being too pessimistic two familiar figures appeared on a snow ridge. Fifteen minutes later Ram Bahadur and his companion made a jubilant entry into camp, swaggering like mountaineers returning after successfully summitting a peak.

'That way,' Bahadur repeated as he pointed to a gully to the immediate west of our camp, dog-tired from his efforts for the day. To reach the gully we would have to descend for an hour or so (the bad news) but after that there seemed to be a possible route up to the pass.

'Glad that's settled,' I said to Almas.

'We have still to get over the pass,' he replied, mindful that 'we' included the team of porters who were relying on us for their safety. Above all I wanted to avoid a repeat of the dramas when crossing the Darwa Pass a few days ago. We would need a clear, bright morning tomorrow or we would wait another day.

The first rays of sunlight hit my tent at 6am. There was not a trace of cloud in the early morning sky. It was an auspicious start. Spurred on by the prospect of crossing the Yamunotri Pass we set off, crunching the firm layers of snow not yet softened by the sun. We made rapid progress and within a couple of hours were kicking snow steps up the steep gully immediately below the pass. Ascending the last few metres I could not contain my curiosity. Was this the true pass? This time Ram Bahadur had got it right. To the north I could make out a route down a steep snow gully that would hopefully lead to the alpine reaches of the upper Ruinsara Valley.

'We need to be careful,' Almas reminded me as he unravelled a couple of lengths of rope from one of the porter's kitbags. Securing the rope around a boulder, he dangled the other end of the rope as far as he could down the steep angled snow gully north of the pass. I elected to descend first. Slipping on a harness and clipping a karabiner to the rope, I gingerly stepped off the edge. To my relief the snow was soft, firm and not icy. 'That's going to save us hours,' I muttered.

In a few minutes I had descended about 200 metres before signalling for the porters to follow. There was only one mishap. The youngest porter, who until now had shown complete indifference to the trek, slipped and dropped the tin trunk he was carrying. Before he knew it the trunk had tumbled some 100 metres down the snow slope before coming to rest. Apart from the young man's pride the only item broken was a jar of honey.

Gathering our strength, we trekked on down the narrow glacial valley and by early afternoon had made it to the alpine slopes of the Ruinsara Valley. Our camp was a pure delight. The wildflowers had already burst into bloom and yellow fields of anemone spread beyond the camp, while clusters of tiny purple gentians lit up the meadow and clumps of white saxifrage and the delicate mauve and red primulae clung to the banks of the watercourse. On the alpine slopes the white-pinkish flowers of the *Rhododendron companulatum* were already in bloom, while the first green shoots had appeared on the otherwise barren branches of the silver birch trees.

We were elated to have made the first crossing of the Yamunotri Pass that season. It was a proverbial watershed for me. After the anguish of crossing the Darwa Pass in the hailstorm, I had begun to believe that reaching Kashmir might not be possible. Now, for the first time on the trek, I was content, confident that with determination and an abundance of good luck I was finally on my way. As I erected my tent, unpacked my kitbag and laid out my sleeping bag on my inflated mattress I felt completely at home. The light was already fading fast as I enjoyed a celebratory glass or two of single malt whisky before retreating to Jeet's *dhaba*. And by the time I had brushed my teeth (taking care to distinguish between the tube of toothpaste and the tube of sun cream) and washed my face and hands in an ice-cold stream I was ready for bed. That night I drifted into a sound sleep, blissfully aware that there were no more pass crossings for the next ten days.

Not long after leaving camp the following day we passed a flock of sheep heading to the high mountain pastures. Unlike the Gujar, the local shepherds did not own their flock. They came from lower down the valley and were contracted by the villagers to mind the flocks until the end of September. Their constant calls did little to hasten the sheep. Several guard dogs followed at a distance wearing huge leather collars studded with metallic spikes to protect them from vicious leopard attacks. By lunchtime we had established our camp on the secluded meadow of Dev Thatch. It was time for some of us at least to take a well-earned rest.

However, for Ram Bahadur a visit to the 'bright lights' of Seema seemed a perfect way to fill in the afternoon. The village was, after all, only an hour's walk down the valley. Jeet gave him a shopping list that included vegetables and eggs while the porters put in an order for a bottle or two of *arak*, the concentrated local liquor made from fermented barley. By the time Bahadur returned it was obvious that some serious imbibing had already taken place. The villagers would have been keen to hear about the condition of the snow on the Yamunotri Pass and no doubt Bahadur would have slightly exaggerated our endeavours as the sampling got underway. Much to Jeet's disgust Bahadur had dropped the eggs on his way back although thankfully the bottles of *arak* were still intact. Judging by the laughter and singing among the porters that night, Bahadur had selected a fine vintage.

Surprisingly, no one seemed the worse for wear the following morning as we set off to Har ki Dun. Judging by the number of *dhabas* along the trail we were back on a main trekking route leading from the trailhead at Sankri to the delightful meadows of Har ki Dun. This is one of the most popular treks out of Mussoorie, as evidenced by the groups from Delhi, Rajasthan and as far away as Gujarat, all gaining their first taste of the mountains. Most of them were also mildly amused by my entourage. 'You are one man but you have so many porters,' was the gist of it.

I left Almas to fill in the details. 'OK, they didn't quite get the fact that a foreign trekker old enough to be my father intended to walk to Kashmir so I told them we were trekking to Manali.'

They were impressed. It was a line I was getting used to and one that was often repeated in the months ahead.

It took me time to adjust to the activity on the trail. I put my head down and walked ahead, locked in my own thoughts. I would only occasionally stop to listen to a birdcall or appreciate the sunlight on an ancient oak or distant peak. Sometimes I wondered what my daughter or my friends were up to. Although I had made the decision not to invite my friends to join me for a week or two on the trek I occasionally regretted it. There was so much to share in these magnificent mountains. I wondered how our Summer Rambler had coped. No mention is made in the text of his family or friends or his plans once the trek was completed. I have always admired characters that never feel daunted by the prospect of their own company. Even after a couple of days camping on my own I felt the need for company. It was sufficient for me to consider whether a solitary life was one I could ever truly aspire to.

Har ki Dun is a perfect spot to while away a day or two: a huge meadow carpeted with anemones, primulae and gentians that merge with impressive stands of silver fir. At the head of the valley the sacred peaks of Swargarohini provide a constant source of inspiration. According to legend, the Pandavas brothers are said to have climbed these peaks while ascending their stairway to heaven. It was one of the highlights of their adventures in the Mahabharata, the Hindu epic written between 1000 and 700 BC. The epic captured the imagination of countless generations of devotees keen to appreciate how the Pandavas wandered the Himalaya in exile before assuming their rightful rule over northern India. Finally, they renounced their worldly kingdom to ascend to the abode of the gods. This is of course just one legend. It would be a brave man who tried to determine whether the Pandavas ascended their sacred staircase here or at one of the other designated locations in the western Himalaya.

On a more mundane level I was in need of a thorough wash. The possibility of getting body lice, as I had done on another extended trek, was not a distant memory. The combination of the hot sun and the crystal-clear stream alongside our camp was the opportunity I had been waiting for. Carrying a plastic bucket full of ice-cold water I retreated to a sunny glade behind a large boulder and commenced a ritual that I would occasionally repeat throughout my trek. Stripping to my boxers I repeatedly soaped up, rinsed myself with the icy water and swore like a trooper until satisfied that my increasingly slender 55-year-old body was clean enough.

Returning to Jeet's *dhaba* I interrupted a poignant conversation. 'Can I get a job with your company?' was how Bahadur embarked on his story of misfortune. The previous year his brother had lost three fingers on an Indian army expedition to Kamet, a 7000-metre peak in the Garhwal Himalaya. He had still not been paid any compensation. Bahadur then poured out what lay at the heart of his own tale of woe. 'It's my son though that really needs an eye operation.'

Bahadur had recently travelled to Rookee (a town on the way to Rishikesh) where a private hospital had quoted him Rs15000 (US\$300). To raise the money he would have to work all season—an unlikely prospect as he would have little chance of getting any lucrative employment during the monsoon months of July and August.

In contrast, Jeet Cheetri was in a comfortable position. He had been working for World Expeditions (India) for the past eleven years. Like most Nepalese he was keen to work. He had started out as a field assistant before being promoted to assistant cook and then cook. He was paid a regular salary throughout the year (which included a monthly bonus and a field



allowance) whether on a climbing expedition or trek in the Himalaya or on a camel safari in Rajasthan. Apart from paying rent for his small room in Delhi what he saved was sent back to his wife and young son who lived in a small village about a half an hour's walk beyond the Pokhara to Kathmandu highway. At thirty-nine, he was well off by Nepalese standards. During his absence his wife and mother worked his fields and tended the four buffalo. By his calculations he would only have to work for a couple more years before he could consider a comfortable retirement.

'So what would you do with yourself when you get bored? Almas asked.

'I may lead a trek like you,' he chuckled.

The following morning we were back in our familiar routine. At first light I heard the roar of the kerosene stove coming to life in Jeet's *dhaba*. Crawling out of my sleeping bag I pulled on my jacket and walking pants before slipping into the cook tent. Shortly afterwards, Almas joined me although we shared few words at this time of the morning. Instead, we clutched our tin mugs and savoured the best brew of the day. Back in my tent I packed my gear into my bright-red kitbag, gave myself an eyewash with a bowlful of tepid water and, after the ritual ablutions, devoured a bowl of porridge and drank another mug of tea. Outside the porters organised their loads, glad as always to get the show on the road. It was a simple routine that we would follow during the months ahead.

From Har ki Dun it took only a couple of hours to descend to Seema. By the time we arrived Bahadur had already renewed acquaintances. A group of villagers double-checked his account of the Yamunotri Pass with Almas while I happily slurped cups of hot sweet tea and consumed platefuls of freshly made samosas laced with chilli.

'How deep was the snow on the pass?' was the question of the hour as the villagers gather round for any snippets of gossip. This was after all the only way they could get news. The radio programs only buzzed and crackled news from far off Dehra Dun or Delhi, a world away from these ruddy-faced men dressed to the nines in their coarse-spun woollen jackets and pants. The women slipped past dressed in long multi-layered cotton skirts complete with a cummerbund wrapped several times around their waist. They had work to do. The fields of wheat, potato and peas needed constant tending. It would be their lot until the harvest in late September.

On the outskirts of the village, apple orchards and fine stands of chestnut and walnut trees provided welcome shade. Wild roses clung to the dry stone walls. For a moment I imagined I was back in the heart of the English countryside perhaps a century ago when many of my ancestors would have followed a similar rural lifestyle.

Beyond Seema we entered a forest of maple, oak, spruce and rhododendron. I disturbed a troupe of langur monkeys. Before I knew it about thirty of these long-tailed grey monkeys with their distinctive black faces had screeched and chattered at my intrusion before swinging from branch to branch through the thick forest. Lower down the valley I passed through a settlement of fifteen to twenty houses spread across the hillside. Built in traditional pahari style, the houses were constructed with alternative layers of stone and timber that supported ornately carved verandahs extending around the upper living quarters. Unkempt children with runny noses watched me from behind partially closed shutters. Suddenly a mongrel growled as he emerged from beneath a house. I raised my ski pole to defend myself before a villager chased him off with a well-aimed rock.

The only blots on the landscape were the concrete rest houses built by the state government. These incongruous two-storey buildings were more suited to cities than to this remote corner of the Himalaya and why the state government had insisted on building them was beyond me. Couldn't the officials have learned anything from the traditional *pahari* style? Or at least taken a leaf out of the book of the Forest Department which maintained delightful wooden huts and bungalows far more in keeping with this secluded valley.

It was late afternoon before we reached the trailhead and the village of Taluka. My previous visits to this flyblown capital of the Himalaya had not been favourable. The village seemed to attract more flies than the rest of the villages in the Har ki Dun Valley put together and today I was not about to change my mind. It takes a lot for me to forgo a glass of tea but on this occasion I was more than happy to scurry round to the Forest Rest House and wait for Jeet and the porters to arrive.

The Forest Rest House *chowkidar*, or caretaker, was an old friend of Almas. A wily soul with a face that could tell a thousand stories, he clasped Almas's hand for a while as a mark of renewed friendship. The *chowkidar* lived in Datmir, a village clearly visible a few kilometres up the valley. While he was employed to look after the government Forest Officers on their tours of duty, he was also required to keep a lookout for villagers smuggling bulbs and medicinal plants

to the lucrative markets of Delhi. The problem was that most of the smugglers were his relatives or fellow villagers.

That evening Almas settled accounts with Bahadur and his porters. The next day would be their last with us as they were contracted to go only as far as the village of Sankri. If all went well they would catch a bus back to Uttarkashi the day after. They had done well and it was after dark before Almas had completed their recommendation slips to ensure that more work would hopefully come their way. As they packed their bags early the next morning a jeep arrived without notice. Twenty minutes later it was fully loaded and on its way. I was left alone to walk at my own pace on the 10-kilometre stage to Sankri.

By the time I reached Sankri the porters had already packed their gear on the roof of a waiting bus. With Bahadur settled in pride of place in the front seat, the driver climbed in, blasted the horn and, before I could even exchange handshakes, the bus trundled off. After two weeks our team of porters was on its way home. As the dust settled, Almas, Jeet and I carried our assortment of kitbags up to the one and only hotel just above the less than remarkable bazaar.

A meeting of the 'where are we going next' committee members was hastily convened in my room. It did not take long for Almas, Jeet and I to decide to get going as soon as possible. Almas had already put out the word to Bhagat Singh, our local contact, that we needed a new team of porters ready to set off the next day.

We also needed to get our paperwork in order. To continue through the Govind National Park we needed an entry permit. This would be no problem we thought, as the National Parks official was summoned to Bhagat Singh's office. After the necessary introductions a rather intense young man handed Almas a series of forms to complete. All was going well until it came to the section specifying our date of entry. As the Govind National Park extends to the upper reaches of the Ruinsara Valley, it appeared our entry would require a bit of backdating. Almas explained to the clerk that since no one from the National Park office had been waiting at the top of the Yamunotri Pass for us, we had had no choice but to enter the national park without a permit. Therefore, we needed to backdate our arrival date. Here we hit a small problem. While paying the fees was not an issue, a request to backdate was taking matters beyond the bounds of bureaucratic reason.

'How is it possible to backdate?' the young man blurted out, somewhat taken aback that such a request could even be considered.

A discussion followed, during which it seemed that everyone in the village offered an opinion.

'You must write a letter to the concerned officer in Dehra Dun. You must give details and express the reason for this variation of the rules,' was eventually the only way the official could think of to save the day.

Suitably inspired, Almas wrote a letter of application to the 'concerned' officer although we could only speculate as to how concerned the officer would really be. However, at least everyone was happy. I later wondered whether that letter ever reached the office of the National Park Directorate in Dehra Dun and, if so, in which file it would eventually gather dust.

The Govind Wildlife Sanctuary and National Park was established in 1955. It covers an area extending from village lands in the lower Tons Valley to the snow-capped ridges formed by the upper tributaries of the Tons, one of the main tributaries of the Yamuna River. It also includes part of the verdant Rupin Valley, where we were heading in the next few days. The lower elevations form the wildlife sanctuary while the higher terrain makes up the national park. In the promotional material they list the dominant fauna: snow leopard, forest leopard and musk deer; the blue sheep, or *bharal*; the heavily built goat known as the Himalayan *thar*; as well as the *serow* and *goral* that are classified as part of the goat-antelope family—wildlife that would have been high on the 'wish list' of our Summer Rambler.

Although the national park literature includes details of the flora it is by no means as comprehensive as the account in *A Summer Ramble*. Our Summer Rambler would have been aware of the correlation between the forest bands and altitude throughout the main valleys south of the Great Himalayan Range. He would also have taken delight in identifying so many species from England—hazel, maple, beech, walnut and horse chestnut, together with various varieties of oak that are found at elevations between 1500 and 3000 metres. While identifying the various species of rhododendron would have been a novelty, he would have been familiar with the conifers, the blue pine, cedar and spruce and the silver fir, even though the Himalayan species would have sometimes been different from those found in cold European climates. At higher elevations it would have been easy to determine that the silver birch extended to around 4200 metres while juniper was present up to 4500 metres. Our Summer Rambler then informs us that 'from here on only grasses, herbs and mosses are met with from thence to the snow'.

One of the main challenges facing the national park management in India is that the parks include large tracts of land where villagers have lived for generations. These are areas where the practice of land clearance for farming, the chopping down of timber for building, the gathering of herbs and bulbs, and traditional hunting and land use are not necessarily compatible with the aims of the national park authorities. However, a start has been made. In recent years notice has been given prohibiting the Gujars to graze their herds of buffalo within the boundaries of the Govind National Park. But this is easier said than done. The Gujars (who mostly live around Dehra Dun in the wintertime) have political clout and have managed for the time being to get a stay order in the courts. The court's ruling is based on the fact that the Gujar have maintained grazing rights for many generations and that therefore they are entitled to access the national park or be given more than adequate compensation.

These issues have long been a concern. Well before the national parks were established in northern India the wildlife and forestry officers would have undertaken their tours of duty into the hills. The Forest Rest Houses were established throughout the Indian Himalaya during the latter half of the nineteenth century, while the Public Works Department bungalows would have accommodated officers supervising the development of tracks and roads into the mountains. The officers were dedicated men with a vision for balancing the demands of the environment with the need for development. Reports were compiled and legislation enforced, limiting for instance the amount of timber that could be felled from various tracts of forest during the season. Further regulations were put in place to limit the tracts of land that could be cleared for farming as well as protecting the forests close to the popular hill stations.

After our exhausting interlude with the cutting edge of Indian bureaucracy I decided to spend the rest of the day people watching. Even in a small village like Sankri it was difficult to adjust to the sight of so many people just passing the time of day. In rural Australia the unemployed seem to linger unseen at home. Here they congregated in the local teahouse at the head of the bazaar. Indeed, the Sankri *dhaba* was a cut above the average, almost bordering on restaurant status. There were plastic tables and chairs, a threadbare carpet on the concrete floor and even tinted glass windows purchased several years ago in Dehra Dun to provide welcome shade from the harsh sunlight.

As in all *dhabas*, the locals drank *chai*—soft drinks were considered a luxury reserved for outsiders. Being the only foreigner within days of Sankri I could not escape attention. 'Where are you going?' they asked, fully aware of the answer but having little idea as to *why* I was intent on trekking to the Kullu Valley. Any explanation seemed inadequate. My quest seemed such a luxury in a place where so many do not have the funds to even travel to Mussoorie and for whom the idea of a trekking holiday is beyond their bounds of comprehension.

The following morning I lost little time setting off. The 'I walk and you guys (including Almas) catch me up in the jeep,' routine was now firmly established. Below Sankri I took short cuts and avoided the road whenever possible. It was mid-morning by the time I reached the village of Netwar and crossed the wooden bridge over the Tons River to the Rupin Valley. At 1405 metres this would be my lowest elevation between now and October. There was no hint of a breeze, the air was oppressive and I took frequent sips from my water bottle. According to the sign it was 14 kilometres along the newly constructed road to Dolan. I arrived about five minutes ahead of the jeep.

Bhagat Singh had done a good job in hiring seven porters at short notice. Four were from Nepal the other three were wafer-thin young men from Sankri. They were dressed as if they were about to go to Delhi, with well-pressed trousers, smart cotton shirts, and runners that seemed hardly adequate to cross the snow-bound pass ahead of us. Even so, they seemed as keen as mustard. 'Don't worry,' Bhagat Singh assured me, 'they have packed good boots and warm clothing in their rucksacks.'

For two days we ascended the Rupin Valley through villages yet to adjust to new developments. Nowadays migration from the mountains to the hill resorts or to Indian cities is steadily increasing. The momentum for change in the hills has become even more pressing with the newly created state of Uttaranchal. Local politicians keen to impress the electorate are promising more funds for roads, education and health. Within a decade the mule trains will no longer ply the trails as the road from Netwar slowly extends up the Rupin Valley. Electricity, linking the majority of the villages to the state grid, will become a reality in the next few years. New schools are being built and staffed by recently qualified teachers who are contracted to spend a minimum of two years in a remote locality. The gulf between the villagers and their counterparts in the towns and cities is slowly narrowing.

Yet traditional values are deeply imbedded in the hills. The caste system is still very much in evidence. There would be at least one Brahmin family in each of the major villages in the Rupin Valley who would officiate at births, deaths and marriages and other religious ceremonies. Yet the distinction between caste and work often overlaps. Everyone, whatever their claim to

rebirth, works in the fields, while the need for cash in a rural economy is just as pressing here as it is in the plains. A Brahmin may run the village store; the *Kshatriya*, the ancestral warrior caste, may belong to one of the famous hill regiments or run the *dhaba* or be the local postmaster. The *Vaishya*—the tradesmen—may include the village carpenter, stone mason or blacksmith. Even the *Dalit*, the sweepers and labourers, the former underclass of rural poor, has a *jagir*—a small tract of land—to farm.

Dipping into my account of the Summer Rambler I found that some aspects of village life hadn't changed substantially since the 1860s. The author comments that the people have 'an utter contempt for comfort, with furniture almost unknown, while bedding is a luxury possessed by only the wealthy'. In fact even now there is no Ikea store within walking distance! The observation that men 'smoke like the Spaniards, seldom taking more than a whiff at a time so that one pipe of tobacco serves half a dozen smokers' is not too wide of the mark today.

What our Summer Rambler really thought of village morals is difficult to ascertain. In an era when Victorian values were the norm he couldn't resist making such juicy observations as 'the young pahari woman rather prides herself on the number of young men who have been fined for her sake, considering it, no doubt, a proof of her charms'. It is a matter of speculation as to whether this observation on pre-marital sex is perhaps made with a tinge of envy.

The Summer Rambler also draws the reader's attention to the animal sacrifices: a sheep or goat together with an offering of grain, sugar or flowers made to the *depta*—the local village god. A sacrifice is also made when a villager is gravely ill. At this time an animal is led around the patient's bed before its head is severed. It is a practice still common today.

As I walked, I had my notebook constantly on hand. A glimpse of the snow-capped ridges at the head of the side valleys held the promise of passes not yet marked in guidebooks. I also noted the absence of even a signpost to mark the state border between Uttaranchal and Himachal Pradesh. The border was merely a simple log bridge over a minor tributary of the Rupin River. Almas and I strode on, intent on reaching Jaknu—at 2600 metres, the highest village in the Rupin Valley—with time to plan the next few days before we crossed the Rupin Pass.

The sprawling village of Jaknu came into view on the crest of a wind-buffed ridge. Located about 500 metres above the Rupin River the village was as isolated as they come with fields of wheat, potatoes and peas flourishing wherever the contours of the steep hillside permitted. It was nearly midday, the temperature was in the high twenties and there was not a trace of cloud in the cobalt blue sky. Wandering off the trail, I sat and rested under the shade of an apple tree.

When I visited Jaknu three years ago an old man bent almost double offered me a handful of dried apricots. This time an enterprising youth directed Almas and I to the village store where a brand new Coca Cola sign was proudly displayed. Sitting on a wooden bench outside the store we ordered tea. Like other village stores in the Rupin Valley—indeed like many others in remote Himalayan valleys—it was first and foremost a meeting place. The purchase of supplies and the exchange of rupees were almost an afterthought. Village elders passed the time of day, smoking their hookah pipe, while children of tender years played happily in the dirt. The storekeeper, a small man with a thick moustache and an ample waistline reflecting years of sitting on his haunches, whiled away the time of day. Behind him in the darkened recess of the store were rows of soft drinks displayed on a narrow wooden shelf. There were assorted packets of salt and glucose biscuits; yellow and red packets of Lipton's tea; plastic containers of cooking oil; sacks of rice, sugar, dhal and onions; and a row of tin containers with spices from distant parts of India. At the back of the store a kerosene stove purred away. It wouldn't be long before our tea was ready.

'Yes, I know Naini Tal,' the storekeeper nodded, pleased to discover that Almas was a fellow man of the hills.

He then turned to me. 'Australia.' 'Australia,' he repeated, pronouncing every syllable with care before making the enlightening observation, 'Best cricket team.'

Any diversion to the storekeeper's day was welcome. Reaching for his pipe he took Almas into his confidence. 'I have a son a daughter and both go to the village school.' In a few years his son would attend the secondary school located about two days' walk down the Rupin Valley. 'Perhaps after that he will go to Mussoorie and get a government job,' he mused. He failed to outline any similar plans for his daughter.

Like most villagers the storekeeper did not put too much faith in politicians of any persuasion. 'What have we got, just a tap for water!' he exclaimed, pointing to the lone tap that supplied the entire village's water supply. And even that only worked in the early morning and evenings.

According to the government plans Jaknu would link up with the state electricity grid in a year

or two. Then there are plans for a road. It is a development that would have been inconceivable a generation ago.

The Forest Rest House was the only place we could stay that night. The crops were ripening and there was nowhere to camp. The problem was that the rest house was securely locked. It transpired that the *chowkidar* was chopping logs in the forest and was not due to return until early evening. We had no choice but to wait.

It was Saturday lunchtime and lessons at the nearby junior school had finished for the day. The word was out that a foreigner had arrived. Before I knew it 'Ragamuffins Inc.' were gathering on the steps of the rest house. The boys formed the inner circle, their ruffled hair and mischievous expressions reflecting a need to explore the contents of my rucksack. Before long everything—including my notebooks, my toothbrush and my camera—was on display. The girls, who were mostly seven or eight years old, formed the outer circle. Their liquid brown eyes and perfect features would soon be tempting the resolve of the young men, perhaps in the fashion described by our Summer Rambler. Free spirits now, in less than a decade they would almost certainly assume the responsibilities of motherhood.

Late that afternoon the elderly chowkidar returned with keys. Jeet unlocked the kitchen, pumping his stove into action before sending the porters to the village to collect water. With tea on the boil, Jeet prepared another rice, dhal and vegetable curry that would have compared favourably with the cuisine in any hotel. I sat on the verandah resting my feet on a wooden ledge and sipping a cocktail of rum and concentrated rhododendron juice purchased a few days ago in Sankri. As evening fell electric lights sparkled in the villages down the valley. I gazed as a constellation of stars light up the darkening sky and wondered how the days would unfold as I made my way across the passes to Kashmir.

It took two days to trek from Jaknu to the base of the Rupin Pass—a delightful interlude following trails through silent blue-pine forest and across alpine meadows still covered in places by snowdrifts. To reach the high camp at 4000 metres entailed a steep ascent, almost on our hands and knees at times, alongside a magnificent waterfall cascading several hundred metres to the floor of a wide glacial valley. On top of the waterfall was a small meadow that afforded views north to the rugged peaks and numerous glaciers that make up the Dhauladhar Range. Looking south the views were equally impressive as ridge after forested ridge merged towards Netwar and the distant hills of Mussoorie, a hundred kilometres away.

I referred again to my *A Summer Ramble in the Himalaya* and wondered whether our Summer Rambler would have changed his views on the wildlife if he had been born today. Whether the nineteenth-century sportsman who loved the mountains so dearly would have swapped his rifles for a pair of binoculars and a field guide and whether his love of the mountains would nowadays have made him an environmentalist? I would like to think so.

## **CHAPTER 5**

### **A Road to Tibet**

On a pre-1947 map of India's north-west border with Tibet, the Hindustan-Tibet road is clearly marked by a dotted red line winding its way up the course of the Sutlej River. In the nineteenth century the road was one of the most important trade routes between India and Tibet. Coarsely woven blankets, tobacco, horseshoes, saddles and even firearms were carried north along the precipitous trails where they were traded for salt and the highly prized supplies of fine shawl wool, the *pashm*.

The main impediment to trade was the terrain. In places the trail was hardly suitable for laden porters let alone mule trains. Following the Gurkha wars in 1814-15 the British were keen to open up trade throughout the newly acquired territories between Shimla, Kinnaur and Tibet. However, although plans were drawn up at the time, it still took the British the best part of forty years, until 1854, to complete a trail suitable for commercial trade. 'Does the Lord Sahib think the rocks are made of soft cheese?' was a pointed and often-repeated remark, as the villagers toiled for months at a time to clear the huge landslides. To complete the trail, the authorities relied heavily on the system of *beggar*, literally forced labour. Like most rulers in the hills, the Raja of Rampur had long considered a man's strength to be a physical asset indebted to the state. It was a system exploited to the hilt and one that continued in some Himalayan regions up until the turn of the twentieth century.

The trail was no more than a bridle path until the Indo-China border war of 1962. Only then was the strategic need for a road justified. Even now it is in constant need of repair, as anyone who travels along the highway in the late spring will testify.

I looked forward to completing a challenging circuit of the mountain region of Kinnaur. My route would involve one difficult pass crossing before wandering down the modern day Hindustan-Tibet road—now known as National Highway 22—to the region's administrative headquarters at Rekonig Peo. The ten-day stage would provide a link between the alpine pastures and Hindu farming villages—the Summer Rambler's country—that I had followed for the past two weeks and the Trans-Himalayan regions that border Tibet. After completing the demanding circuit I would be within a month or so of reaching Manali.

From our camp to the north of the Rupin Pass (4540 metres) I could see all that lay ahead of me. Immediately opposite were the glistening summits of the Kinnaur Kailas Range. Below me the tiny alpine pastures give way to dark forests of deodar, spruce and pine. In the depths of the verdant Sangla Valley the rustic villages awaited the morning sun. The view certainly compensated for the previous day's efforts.

To reach Kinnaur, Almas, Jeet and I, together with our team of porters from Sangri, had ascended the upper reaches of the secluded Rupin Valley. That's when the weather had closed in. Ominous clouds had built up in the early morning as we set off to cross the Rupin Pass on the crest of the Dhaula Dhar Range. To reach the pass involved ploughing through deep snow before tackling a steep and exposed 200-metre rock gully.

At the base of the pass Almas and I took stock of the gully. 'It looks OK,' mused Almas, even though he had not been over the pass before, and neither had I so early in the season. I nodded, anxious not to undermine the confidence of the porters who were by now sitting on their loads smoking their *bedis*—the local cigarettes—as they waited for the signal to go. 'You lead and I will follow with the porters,' I suggested. With that, Almas headed up the last snow slope beneath the gully. After heaving himself up the first series of boulders Almas waited for the porters and me to follow. The lead porters experienced little difficulty in finding footholds for their rubber-soled boots on the boulders but the porters at the back were less confident. Without waiting for them Almas headed upwards taking the lead porters with him. Jeet also went on leaving me cursing and doing my best to encourage the younger porters with the heaviest loads. Although there was no technical climbing, no tenuous hand or footholds, one false step by the front runners could dislodge a rock the size of a house brick with horrifying results.

'Wait!' I implored, trying my best to ensure that no porter stood directly below another when ascending particularly treacherous sections where the rocks were covered in a thin coating of ice. Several times I held my breath as I waited and watched them negotiate the tricky sections. I

could hear my heart pounding and felt the sweat dripping off my back. Looking up, I noticed that any suggestion of blue sky had by now disappeared; dark clouds billowed above and the temperature in the gully had dropped dramatically.

For many of the porters this was their first serious pass crossing and I could see by their expressions that this was not what they had expected. Strong, agile, yet inexperienced, they would look to me for directions as to when to start and when to rest—something that should have come naturally to them. At last, after the best part of an hour, I could see Almas waiting at what I assumed was the crest of the pass. ‘How much further?’ I bellowed but to no avail. He had not heard me. It was only a few minutes later that I heard the muffled whoops of encouragement of the lead porters. I knew then that we didn’t have far to go. Just below the pass I left the final porters to rest and headed up to Almas.

‘Glad we made it,’ I gasped. As the porters exchanged hugs of sheer relief at reaching the pass I tried to get my bearings. There was no familiar ridge or valley or even a glimpse of the mighty Kinnaur Kailas Range to the north. Thick swirling mist precluded any sense of elation. I could not see more than 5 metres in front of me. There was no possibility of any photographic opportunities; we could have been anywhere. After less than ten minutes on the pass we decided to head down. The porters slipped and slithered down the snow slopes. Rolls of thunder could be heard in the distance and there was sense of urgency to get down to camp without delay.

We just made it. Within minutes of establishing our camp the first heavy spots of rain hit our tents. Then the heavens opened, testing the waterproofing of my nylon dome tent and Jeet’s *dhaba*. Judging by the contented expressions of the porters their canvas tent was up to scratch. Muffled comments were followed by shrieks of laughter as the porters reminded each other that they were within a few hours of reaching the town of Sangla and completing their trek the next day.

Later that afternoon I ventured to Jeet’s *dhaba*. After the exertions of the pass Jeet and Almas were in fine form. There was no end to their jokes and laughter. ‘Have you got a couple of women to see in Sangla?’ I enquired, trying to fathom why they were in such high spirits. According to Almas the explanation involved matters of survival rather than matters of the flesh. They were both relieved that the day was over. Neither of them had been over the pass before and they had paid a little too much attention to some of the porters’ accounts of how the pass could be under 5 feet of deep snow. ‘We would have lost Jeet!’ I replied.

I then got down to the serious business. Facing Almas with all the authority of geography teacher bordering on retirement I asked him about the significance of the Rupin Pass. ‘If I was taking a leak right on the crest of the pass which way would my water flow?’

‘Into your boots,’ was his smart reply. This was not the answer I was searching for. Puffing myself up with self-importance I pointed out that the pass in fact marked the geographical divide between the catchments of the Tons and Yamuna rivers and therefore of the Ganges, the Sutlej and the Indus.

It took Almas sometime to think it through. After all it’s not everyday that you cross a pass marking the divide between the headwaters of the Indus and the Ganges—the two largest rivers draining the Indian subcontinent. After a while Almas nodded and almost seemed impressed, or at least gave that impression until I left the tent.

The bus was leaving, and so were the porters. By mid-morning the next day our entourage had completed a rapid descent to the sprawling Sangla bazaar. As the porters quickly consumed *chai* and samosas, Almas counted wads of Rs100 (US\$2) notes. Payments were made, including a day’s bonus, before the porters headed as fast as they could to the bus. In eight hours they would be in Shimla, the Himachal Pradesh state capital. By the following evening they would be back among friends, swapping wildly exaggerated tales in the Sankri bazaar of crossing snow-bound passes.

In the rush there had hardly been time to greet Prabhu Singh. Prabhu worked in the Delhi office and had travelled to Sangla to help out with our arrangements. He had arrived the previous evening and made a tentative reservation for us to stay at the Kinnaur Kailas hotel. Why he had believed that we would arrive on time was anyone’s guess. What really mattered was that we were assured of a room at the best hotel in town. As we completed the short trek to our accommodation, Prabhu recounted the latest office gossip. I lagged behind dreaming of a hot shower. Five minutes later I had stripped off my clothes and had just turned on the hot water when there was a bang at my door. ‘We are off to get supplies,’ announced Almas.

Nothing could have been further from his mind, of course. Judging by the looks on their faces, Almas, Jeet and Prabhu were off in search of a few bowls of mutton curry. The purchase of rice,

flour, cooking oil and vegetables could wait until the next day.

In the late afternoon I headed off to the Kamru Fort. In contrast to the previous days' snow-bound trails I ascended an endless series of concrete steps to the ancient capital of Kinnaur. It took the best part of an hour to reach the entrance to the imposing five-storey fort, but to my disappointment the huge entrance door was securely bolted. Undeterred, I climbed a ridge affording a bird's-eye view of the inner compound. It resembled a builder's yard. Planks of wood and sacks of concrete were strewn to one side. Judging by the renovation in progress it would not be long before the ancestral home of the Raja of Kamru would be restored to its former glory. That was not surprising, for the current Raja of Kamru is Vir Bhadra Singh, a respected politician and also the long serving Chief Minister of Himachal Pradesh.

According to the epic poem the *Mahabharata*, the Pandavas brothers are said to have lived in Kinnaur and married the same wife, Draspadi. Legend has it that this provided the foundation for polyandry for both Hindu and Buddhist communities. This time-honoured practice was common throughout Kinnaur until quite recently, as it was well suited to a land where the men were often away for months, sometimes years at a time trading in Tibet and distant Himalayan kingdoms.

While there are many cultural parallels with Tibet, what is remarkable is that the Tibetans did not invade Kinnaur. Throughout its history Kinnaur was never part of Tibet. Whenever the Kingdom of Guge, or West Tibet, seized the initiative to extend its political power it focused on Ladakh or Spiti. By some historical quirk Kinnaur managed to retain its cultural identity even when the borders of the Moghul Empire spread across the West Himalaya. It was only after the Gurkha invasions in the early eighteenth century that it temporarily lost its independence. Following the Gurkha retreat, Kinnaur became part of the Shimla Hill states under British administration. After 1947 Kinnaur was for a time part of the Punjab. In 1966 it was integrated into Himachal Pradesh, which became a fully-fledged state in 1971.

For many years foreigners were not permitted to visit Kinnaur due to its proximity to the Tibetan border. According to the regulations, you still needed an Inner Line permit—a document allowing you to travel close to the international borders—to trek over the Charang La and complete a full circuit of Kinnaur. Fortunately Prabhu Singh had taken care of this. On his way from Delhi he had stopped in Shimla to complete the necessary application forms. It was a fine effort given that the forms would normally have required my signature and presence. This was not to be the last we saw of Prabhu. If all went to schedule we would meet up with him again in a couple of weeks' time at a road head in Spiti, from where he would trek with us over the Pin Parbati Pass to the Kullu Valley.

The next day, after consuming more than their fair share of mutton curries, Almas and Jeet were ready to move on. It was agreed that they would hire a jeep to transport our gear and supplies to the village of Chitkul, the highest village in the Sangla Valley, at the base of the Charang La. In the meantime, I would satisfy my compulsion to walk all the way even if it meant sometimes walking on roads.

According to the roadside sign it was a 26-kilometre hike to Chitkul. For the first few kilometres I had the road to myself. In this rarified climate I could appreciate why the Sangla Valley was so attractive to the early British travellers escaping the soaring heat of the Indian Plains. The rustic stone and timber settlements set amid pine-forested hillsides and snow-capped peaks would have invited them to draw comparisons with the nearby Kullu Valley and even the fabled Vale of Kashmir.

Dreams of Kashmir were brought to an abrupt halt by the sound of an approaching car. Well before it shuddered to a stop beside me I was covered in dust. A young Indian couple wound down their window. 'Would you like a lift?' They were obviously concerned that the man with the white beard had spent a little too long in the sun.

Wiping the dust from my face I politely declined. 'Thanks, but my friends will be picking me up,' I explained.

It was a lie, but what else could I have said? 'No thanks, I'm walking to Kashmir,' would have confirmed the couple's suspicions that I was not the full quid.

An hour later Almas and Jeet passed me in a jeep that, judging by its condition, had seen better years. They stopped and explained that they would continue to Sangla and set the tents up before I arrived. It was a plan to which I readily agreed.

A wall of 6000-metre peaks loomed at the head of the Sangla Valley, forming an impressive backdrop to the forty to fifty wooden dwellings that constituted the village of Chitkul. Yet, in spite of its spectacular setting, the final approach along the road to the village was less than



inspiring. Half-built government offices lined the dirt road as well as an assortment of discarded jerry cans and metal pipes. Heaps of garbage were strewn down the hillside. Chitkul would not have won any 'best-kept village' awards. No one, it seemed, cared.

Fortunately our tents were pitched on the far side of the Sangla River, on a grassy bank shaded by blue pine. Clusters of gentians, primulae, *goviana*, and *saxifraga* dotted the bank in a riot of blues, reds and yellows, while the pinkish-white blooms of the *Rhododendron campanulatum* swept up the hillside. Taking off my boots, I immersed my feet in the ice-cool mountain river and watched a pair of river chats whistling and chattering as they ceaselessly darted above the surface of the water.

With time on my hands I sat in Jeet's *dhaba*. Jeet was pumping the stove and the kettle was on the boil for an afternoon cuppa served with a plate of glucose biscuits. To date I had had no food cravings. I could imagine nothing worse than waking up to a full English breakfast with fried eggs, bacon, tomatoes and fried bread. Give me my porridge any day. At the other end of the gastronomic continuum, I also had no dreams of haute cuisine. I explained to Jeet that in Australia and the UK people went out to fancy restaurants to savour a sliver of food for a price that could keep an average Indian family going for a month. For me rice, dhal and curried vegetables would always be a more satisfying option. I could have brought stacks of health bars with me as well, but these had no appeal in a land abounding with fresh, wholesome food. I would rather spend my money on another bottle of Old Monk rum.

There is something profoundly satisfying about being in a tent after a long day's walk. You are tired for a start, and grateful to strip off your clothes which you can fling into a corner without any thought of reprisal. If it is raining, even a light patter, it soothes the senses as you wrap your sleeping bag partially over your head. And it is sheer bliss to be woken at first light by the sound of a stove purring as you anticipate the first brew of the day.

That night I awoke around midnight. Our camp was bathed in the warm, moonlit air. A gentle breeze wafted through the blue pine and I could hear the constant plop, plop of the small boulders as they moved along the riverbed. I watched the twinkling of the stars and the occasional light flickering in the village on the far side of the valley. After an hour or so I slipped back into my sleeping bag and slept soundly until well after dawn.

By the time I emerged from my tent the daily exodus from the thriving village of Chitkul was well underway. Men led mules and *zhos*—a cross between a cow and a yak that is best described as a shaggy cow—up the valley, while women carrying spades and hoes were on their way to tend the fields of mustard seed, wheat, barley, potatoes and peas that thrive during the short growing season.

Almas was on 'porter patrol' and headed to the bazaar. This was one of the few times when we had not prearranged porters and he was anxious to find out if some were available to help us over the Charang La. We were in luck. Half a dozen Nepalese workers who had been helping the ITBP—the Indo-Tibetan Border Police—to supply the camps higher up the Sangla Valley had some time off. They were pleased with the prospect of earning extra money. While none of them had been over the pass before, that did not dampen their enthusiasm. Even before Almas could draw up an equipment checklist they showed him their sleeping bags, boots and even sunglasses issued to them by the ITBP. We were ready to go.

Hari Shankar, a small, agile man in his mid-thirties and the porters' spokesman, was an immensely likeable character. By the look of him, he was also not averse to hard work. As is the case for most of his fellow countrymen, his income in rural Nepal was uncertain and the increase in violence associated with the rise of the Maoist movement had added to his worries. Five years ago a friend had invited him to join him in Chitkul. Since then his prospects had improved. Three years ago he had married and he had recently purchased a block of land in his village a short distance from Jumla in western Nepal. 'Politicians are all the same,' he told Jeet, 'whether Maoist, Communist or the King, it doesn't matter.'

For Hari Shankar and Jeet the Kathmandu Valley was another world. Indeed, both had only visited the Nepalese capital once in their life.

The following morning we set off to the Charang La. I was filled with dread at the prospect of ascending endless scree slopes for most of the day. Plodding slowly up an ill-defined trail, I watched Almas move steadily without a moment's rest. Was age catching up with me? No, I told myself, it was just my stupidity in even thinking I could keep up with someone twenty years younger. Yet even ascending at a more sedate pace I was still spent by the time I reached the base camp. 'Campsite' was a misnomer—it was the only level patch of dirt between Chitkul and the pass. A trickle of water edged across the gravel before seeping beneath the huge boulders. But this was by no means a dismal setting. Across the valley hanging glaciers and the high peaks of the Dhaulagiri formed a wondrous backdrop, while over 1200 metres below, jeeps

looking more like children's dinky toys negotiated the final switchbacks along the road to Chitkul.

Almas was up well before first light the next day. 'Come on, come on,' he implored the porters, who were snuggled in Jeet's tent like puppies in a basket.

'Leave me here,' I offered from the depths of my tent, similarly reluctant to emerge from the warmth of my sleeping bag. Spooning hot porridge as dawn broke, I watched as my tent disappeared into a porter's kitbag. I didn't even have time for a call of nature before I was crunching my way across the undulating snowfields. In an hour we had gathered at the base of the pass.

Then the fun began. Almas kicked steps into the snow, imploring the porters to rest until it was safe for them to ascend the steep, icy slope. However, the younger porters grew impatient and made their own steps. Almas and I watched in disbelief as they slithered back towards their fellow countrymen at the bottom of the slope. This was trekking snakes-and-ladders style. When it at last dawned on the porters that Almas and I were acting in their interests they sat on their haunches and smoked their *bedis* until we gave them the signal to follow.

Just over two hours after leaving camp we were on the summit of the Charang La (5280 metres). The host of impressive peaks and formidable glaciers left no doubt that we were in the midst of the high Himalaya. The porters placed stones on the rock cairns as a token of thanks to the gods of the pass. They were in fine spirits and elated to have reached the summit so quickly. But they were only half way. We still had to get down and immediately ahead of us was a treacherous section that needed to be negotiated with the utmost care.

Without further ado, Almas headed off down the far side of the pass. I followed, breaking the thin crust of soft snow to reveal a sheer sheet of ice dropping steeply down to a glacier far below. With adrenaline pumping, I motioned to Jeet to follow me. He moved cautiously, his boots unable to find any purchase. Then he slipped and, for a moment, the colour drained from his face.

'Why didn't we put out a fixed rope!' I cursed, as Jeet mercifully regained his footing and made it safely across. I yelled in desperation to Almas to come back and help but he was too far away to hear. So, with Hari Shankar offering a trusted hand and me standing directly below them, the porters slowly edged their way across the sheet of ice.

Way below, Almas finally stopped and waited for us to catch up. That took some doing as most of the porters were sinking up to their waist in snow as they tried to ease their way down the snowfield. On the far side of the vast glacial valley avalanches boomed down the mountainside. 'The sooner we get down the better,' I muttered to myself.

By the time the last of the porters reached the glacial moraine they were dog-tired. With protracted rests it took the best part of the afternoon to reach the meadow known as Lalanti. It was a fine campsite: grassy, sheltered and laced with tiny streams. Satisfied with the day's efforts I sat on a boulder and observed the endless folds of the Zaskar Range, which defines India's border with Tibet. Below were the deep gorges and secluded villages of the Thangi Valley that would take only a few hours to reach the next day.

True to plan it took Almas and I only a few hours to descend to our next camp at Shruling in the Thangi Valley. With my Inner Line permit in hand, Almas and I approached the ITBP camp. Two policemen wrapped in blankets directed us to a corrugated-iron hut. Inside, a large stove was smouldering, while posters of Bollywood movie stars were plastered on the walls. As I presented my passport and papers, Almas checked the register that was about to record the first entry for the season.

Not a word was spoken while we waited. The policeman studied my passport carefully, inspecting the numerous visa stamps reflecting journeys through countries he would never visit. With a look of resignation he returned my passport. 'Can I come to Australia?' he enquired in perfect English.

I replied that he would need a visa and that it sometimes took time.

He understood the gist of my comment. Managing a weak smile he accepted the fortunes that would leave him in this isolated corner of the Himalaya until next spring.

Fortunately, the policeman and his half a dozen colleagues would have their hands full over the next couple of months and the days would pass quickly. Each year many hundreds of villagers from the far corners of Kinnaur take part in the Kinnaur Kailas Circuit to join an annual pilgrimage coinciding with the July-August full moon. Some trek over the Charang La and complete the trek around Kinnaur Kailas (6050 metres), the abode of Lord Shiva and the most

sacred mountain between here and Gangotri. At present it was hard to believe that even the most-hardy villagers would contemplate the trek. However, in a couple of months most of the snow would have melted and the pass would be a different proposition from the one we had just encountered.

By the time Almas and I returned from the ITBP camp Jeet and the porters had established our camp on a tiny meadow set amid stunted cypress trees and clumps of juniper. It was about as good a campsite as you could possibly expect at the head of the Thangi Gorge. After preparing lunch Jeet had little to do but pass the time of day with Hari Shankar and his friends, and that included expounding his theory concerning our new reserves of energy. 'It's all to do with the *Chyawanprash*,' he argued.

Two days earlier, while making some last minutes purchases in Chitkul, Jeet had inadvertently purchased a popular brand of Ayurvedic health food. He had meant to buy ghee—refined cooking oil—but had picked up a plastic container of the same colour containing something called *Chyawanprash*. By the time he realised his mistake he was halfway up to the Charang La.

'Let's give it a go,' I had said, reading the label that claimed the mixture contained no less than forty-nine herbal ingredients. One teaspoon and I was a convert—the thick dark paste tasted better than it looked! Indeed, the herbal paste was to become my regular 6am medicine (in contrast to my 6pm 'medicine' of Old Monk rum). I was hooked. *Chyawanprash* would remain part of my daily diet until I reached Kashmir three and a half months later. 'It should keep me out of a retirement village for a few more years,' I told Almas.

The village of Charang high above the valley floor was clearly visible well before we reached it. Prayer flags fluttered from the rooftops of the whitewashed houses set amid fields of ripening barley fields. The scene could have been anywhere in Tibet or Ladakh and yet, I reminded myself, we were still in a remote corner of Himachal Pradesh.

Wandering into the village we were greeted by the usual gathering of school children anxious to test out their English.

'Where are you a-going?'

'What is your good name?'

'What is your country?'

Almas and I retreated along a narrow alleyway. Seeing us, the village storekeeper directed us up a rickety wooden staircase onto the roof of his house. Sitting on coarsely woven rugs, we took in the view of the mountains and high ridges enclosing the valley.

The storekeeper was well into his fifties and grinned from ear to ear at the prospect of a diversion to his normal afternoon routine. 'I have been to Shimla,' he told us, 'but mostly I go to Rekong Peo or Rampur,' towns about a couple of days' journey from here. During the visits he would purchase supplies, including kerosene, salt biscuits, packets of tea and the basic staples, to supplement the villagers diet of *tsampa*—ground barley grain—and potatoes introduced in the nineteenth century by the Moravian missionaries.

Up until a generation ago trade of another kind would have been the mainstay of the economy. As recently as 1962 regular caravans crossed the rugged passes to Tibet. Coarsely woven blankets and grain were traded for supplies of salt from the vast brackish lakes of Tibet. Since the Indo-China war the border has been closed forcing younger generations to focus on new horizons. Even today most villagers are only vaguely aware that within a decade or so a road up the Tharang Valley will link them with NH 22, the Hindustan-Tibetan highway. For the time being the furthest many will travel is to the pastures above the village to mind their flocks. In the meantime their children's minds are shaped by young teachers drafted from the Kangra Valley in the south of the state.

Although it was late in the afternoon Almas and I decided to walk to the tiny monastery about a kilometre above the village. Historically the monastery was extremely important with considerable evidence testifying that its foundations date back to the tenth century. This was a time when 'the Great Translator', the Tibetan scholar Ring Chen Brang Po, established 108 monasteries across western Tibet, including this remarkable example in the Tharang Valley.

At the entrance to the monastery a Buddhist nun in her early twenties emerged from a side door. At first Almas and I were taken aback by the gaunt figure with her shaven head and dressed in the ubiquitous *chuba*, a long flowing red tunic dropping to her ankles. After acknowledging our greeting she turned and, without uttering a word, headed in the direction of a small temple. Crossing the cobbled courtyard, she drew a huge key from under the folds of her *chuba* and unlocked the bolts of an ancient wooden door. We entered a darkened chamber

and focused our eyes on a line of exquisite wall paintings in dire need of restoration. Although I am no scholar of Buddhist icons, I was aware that the paintings reflected a style followed by artists from Kashmir and northern India well before cultural inspiration came from Tibet. While examples of similar styles, notably in Alchi in Ladakh and Tabo in the nearby Spiti Valley, have attracted substantial support from overseas NGOs, funds to undertake restoration had not yet flowed into this isolated valley of Kinnaur.

Until then our visit to the monastery had been conducted in complete silence. This was only broken when I offered a donation to the nun as I was about to leave. Without warning she grasped my arm and implored me to wait while she prepared tea. Hoping not to cause offence I had to decline. I was mindful that Almas and I had the best part of a two-hour walk back down the Thangi Valley to camp. After exchanging farewells I headed back across the courtyard with Almas.

'Not so quick,' Almas remarked as he noticed a couple of uniformed ITBP guards waiting for us.

'Not another welcoming party,' I replied.

'Sir, our officer wants you to take tea.'

They had seen us coming well before we entered the monastery and no amount of protest on our part was going to enable us to escape their offer of hospitality.

'Better make it quick or we'll be here all night,' I muttered.

We were escorted into a small whitewashed room in which there was just a metal table and three chairs. Tea was ready. 'Please sit,' said the inspector, a portly Sikh from Chandigarh, as he greeted us with a firm handshake and then looked at us with uncanny interest. 'I have been here nearly a month,' he announced.

Judging by the calendar on the otherwise bare wall time was passing slowly in this isolated outpost. It seemed as if he was just ticking off the days until his departure.

'This is as close as anyone is permitted to travel to the Tibetan border, anywhere in India,' he boasted before explaining that most of his hours were devoted to reports rather than being on patrol. 'When leading patrols time passes quickly,' he smiled before lamenting that it would be the best part of a year before he would see his family again.

By the time Almas and I could finally excuse ourselves from the inspector's office the light was already fading. Indeed it was well after dark before we got back to our camp at Shruling. Removing our boots we apologised to Jeet who had had dinner ready for hours. Once we had eaten, Almas and I had little inclination to accept an invitation to have a drink at the nearby ITBP camp. 'That would be the end of us,' said Almas as he slipped off to his tent.

The following morning Almas and I shouldered our rucksacks and headed into the Thangi Gorge. In places the trail was just wide enough for a skinny donkey! Although it was 9am the walls of the gorge were still in deep shadow; the fragrant smell of wild roses wafted in the chilly breeze.

The tiny settlement of Lambar was as far as the road extended up the Thangi Gorge. Approaching the settlement, we noticed a gang of mainly Nepalese labourers busy clearing boulders from the hillside. They seemed unconcerned by the presence of two trekkers clad in brightly coloured trekking gear and wearing boots that would have cost these workers a month's wages.

Almas and I decided to head on down the 11-kilometre stretch of dirt track to the village of Thangi. It did not take long for the porters to catch up. Hari Singh was first across the line, dumping his load just ahead of his fellow countrymen. Before we could begin to thank the team we heard the unmistakable sound of a jeep toiling up the road. A few minutes later it appeared jam-packed with villagers. The jeep driver was on the lookout for passengers prepared to pay 'petrol money', a token amount designed to ensure that he made it back home to Reokong Peo by nightfall. Hari Shankar struck a deal. In the interim Almas counted the rupees to settle the porters' wages, including double rates for the day over the pass. And that was it. The porters who had accompanied us on the last week were off. We would probably never see them again. By nightfall they would be in Reokong Peo and the next morning would see them back at Chitkul to work out the rest of the season. Almas, Jeet and I were on our own again.

From our dormitory room at Thangi Guest House we decided that the next day we would head down the Sotlej Valley to Reokong Peo, the district headquarters with its incongruous government buildings, from where we would continue to the almost medieval town of Kalpa 600 metres up the hillside. I was more than aware that a walk down the Hindustan-Tibet highway

was to be my lot the following morning. While this may conjure up romantic images of nineteenth-century travellers making their way back from Tibet, I anticipated a hot dusty bitumen road. Nonetheless, true to the spirit of my traverse, I decided to walk along the highway as far as Reokong Peo while Jeet and Almas would hire the only jeep in the village and organise accommodation for a night or two.

'Could you remind me why I'm doing this?' I asked Almas. He did not utter a sound from the other side of the dimly lit room, pretending to be dead to the world as he drew his sleeping bag over his head. Jeet had set his alarm for me for 4.30am. It was just before dawn and I packed my rucksack in semi-darkness. Outside it was drizzling. By 5am I was off. It was 21 June, the longest day of the year and my thirty-ninth since setting out from Delhi.

An hour later I crossed the bridge over the swirling waters of the Sutlej. Flowing from close to Lake Manasarovar in Tibet, it is one of the five main tributaries of the Indus and follows a course established well before the formation of the Himalaya. Over geological eons it has maintained its course, cutting huge gorges through the axis of the Zaskar, the Himalaya and Dhaulagiri ranges before its waters are harnessed and dammed in the foothills of Himachal Pradesh.

Walking down the highway, I passed teams of labourers, mostly from Bihar and Nepal, working on the road. A constant 'chink, chink' resounded in a tiring rhythm as they chipped away, creating smaller and smaller pieces of rock that would eventually form the road surface. Other workers carried sackfuls of sand from the riverbed or wielded picks and shovels to clear landslides that occasionally blocked the highway.

Many of the labourers had been working since dawn, preferring to rest in the middle of the day. Their shelter was often no more than a plastic sheet over a stone wall that protected them from the worst of the elements. On the roadside a young woman sat with an umbrella shading her baby while her husband and his fellow workers dislodged rocks from the hillside. Periodically, a blast shattered the peace as the gelignite exploded and echoed up the valley. By 10am the sun was baking the rocks and the air in the gorge was oppressive. Was this the contemporary version of *beggar*? Of course these workers were offering their labour in return for a meagre day's pay. Yet what choice did they have? For a season of hard physical toil they would earn around Rs150 per day (US\$3), a sum that would scarcely tide them over till the next year.

I reached Reokong Peo at noon having taken seven hours to cover the 40-kilometre stage. I was tired and desperate to take off my boots. I kept an eye up for Jeet, as he and Almas had driven past several hours ago, and I did not have to look far. Sauntering towards me, he had the air of a man about town. He had already had a haircut and shave and, judging by his contented look, a mutton curry was already under his belt. After a cold drink we headed to Kalpa where hopefully Almas had booked us into a couple of comfortable rooms.

Kalpa is one of the few places where you can gain close views of the Himalaya without getting out of bed. Although few would compare it to the view of Kangchenjunga, the world's third-highest mountain, as seen from Darjeeling, the fact of the matter is that these peaks are right in front of you. They are within spitting distance across the Sutlej Valley. The highest is Jorkanden (6473 metres) capped by a rock pillar pointing towards heaven and towering above the locally revered Kinnaur Kailas (6050 metres). It's a peak to appeal to any flagging soul who questions whether the Himalaya are a source of inspiration.

The village of Kalpa is set in a commanding position above the Sutlej River. In the nineteenth century it was the capital of Kinnaur before the administration moved down the hill to Reokong Peo. Village life is more attuned to the pace of a former age. A labyrinth of narrow roads stems in all directions from a tiny bazaar where a dozen or so stores open for business. These include Premilal Shri Kumar's general store plus a couple of tailors and a *dhapa* displaying a sign for 'Cainese' dishes. Yet even in this historic town STD/ISD signs are riveted to the stone walls while the ground floor of the nearby hotel has been built to accommodate a full-size pool table.

By the time I returned Almas was waiting for me on the hotel verandah. It was obvious he had news that I did not want to hear. 'No one seems to know about the trail,' he began as he related his recent endeavours. He had had no luck finding someone who knew of or who had a relative who had been across the hills to the base of the Tarik La, the pass we needed to cross on the next stage of the trek. I was bitterly disappointed. On a previous visit I had been assured that there was a trail across the forested ridges that would bypass the highway. That evening, after considering my options, I made up my mind not to walk a further 30 kilometres down NH 22. I had had enough of walking on bitumen roads for the time being. If this was the only time (and it was) that I rode in a jeep between Uttarkashi and Kashmir then so be it. Besides which I had already walked most of this section of the highway three years ago.

That had been an eventful journey. In late July 2000 three days of incessant rain had flooded the

upper tributaries of the Sutlej. The river level rose dramatically, destroying sections of the road and washing away many of the bridges. In September 2000 I had crossed the Rupin Pass to Kinnaur. Before I set out from Delhi I was not fully aware of the damage caused by the flood. However, I assumed that rumours of the devastation were exaggerated. It was a poor error of judgment. Crossing the Sutlej by a pulley bridge recently installed by the army, I began to see for myself the extent of the damage. As large sections of NH 22 had been washed away I had no choice but to continue on foot for the best part of 25 kilometres. It was to be a very tiring day. At one stage a huge scree slope extended all the way down the mountainside to the river. Although a rough trail had been made by the road workers, it was still a treacherous passage. My main concern was not the prospect of slipping down towards the river but the possibility of being hit by one of the many small rocks that rocketed without warning down the slope. All I could do was stop, wait and listen, and then move as fast as my legs could carry me across this perilous 400-metre section.

I later discovered that, in spite of the combined work of the army, the Indo-Tibetan Police force and the Public Works Department with its formidable team of engineers, it was not until the following year—in spring 2001—that the road was fully repaired.

It seemed that even with the most modern and sophisticated technology, nothing could contain the elements in the Himalaya. Without doubt the rocks were not formed from 'soft cheese' and were just as likely to cause a landslide today as they had been in the nineteenth century. How much had really changed? My thoughts turned again to the teams of road workers toiling on the highway: a contemporary form of *beggar* as they struggled to maintain the dotted red line of the Hindustan-Tibet road to the borders of Tibet.

## **CHAPTER 6**

### **A Village Called Mudh**

Long before leaving home I had realised that it would be impossible to spend as much time as I would like in some of the more remote valleys. Spiti was a case in point. From preparing my trek schedule, I was aware that I would only be able to spend a week in what is one of the most culturally attractive Trans-Himalayan regions: an ancient land where the gods of the soil, the rivers and passes were held in awe long before the introduction of Buddhism. I looked forward to trekking through this remote outpost where mountain passes and river confluences are still marked by rock cairns or ibex horns to ward off the evil spirits. It is a land where the elusive snow leopard still roams in search of prey and where some of the villages number among the highest permanent settlements in the world.

For centuries, pilgrims and traders had crossed the remote mountain passes bordering Spiti. One of the most intrepid was the renowned sage Padmasambhava who is credited with introducing Buddhism to the spirits of the land in the eighth century. By the early tenth century the first monasteries were established at Dhankar and Tabo in the Spiti Valley. Together with Alchi in Ladakh, they represent some of the oldest Buddhist monasteries in the western Himalaya. In particular the wall paintings provide important examples of Indo-Tibetan art dating from a time when many leading artists and craftsmen of the age travelled from Kashmir and other regions of northern India in search of patronage.

By the end of the tenth century Spiti paid tribute to the Buddhist kings of Ladakh, who had established a dynasty that extended well into western Tibet. It was a situation that was to continue until Ladakh's wars with Tibet in the seventeenth century. Then followed a turbulent period. For a time Spiti was ruled by the Kullu Hindu Rajas, and then the Sikhs until the Treaty of Amritsar in 1846. Three years later Spiti came under British administration, but apart from the occasional visit from the District Commissioner, most of the power and day-to-day decisions were in the hands of the *Nono*, the local ruler of Spiti. It was an arrangement that remained in place until Indian independence in 1947. After that Spiti was administered as part of the Punjab until 1966 when it became part of the newly formed state of Himachal Pradesh.

Like most Himalayan border regions, Spiti is cut off from the rest of India for most of the year. It was only after India's war with China in 1962 that the first roads were built into the region. Being so close to India's sensitive border with China, the region was closed to foreigners until the early 1990s. Since then a steady flow of tourists has travelled through on NH 22, before heading up the Spiti Valley to Tabo and the regions headquarters at Kaza.

After a day in Kalpa spent trying to devise the most interesting trek route to Spiti I accepted that I had little choice but to drive down NH 22 for 20 kilometres and then head up a newly constructed road to the lower reaches of the Baspa Valley. From there I would trek for three days before crossing the Tarik La (4410 metres), a secluded pass to the southeast of the region.

Leaving Kalpa early the next morning it took us only a few hours to drive to the Baspa Valley. The villages hummed with activity as buses and trucks shuffled up the narrow road carrying boxes of apples that would fetch a good price in the markets of Rampur and Shimla. Beehives also provided a lucrative income with the supply of honey seeing its way into the markets of northern India, while fields of wheat and corn ripened in the forest clearings. Against this once Arcadian setting, the villagers were adjusting to a new life—on the electricity grid—following the recent construction of a dam just above Kafnu, the last village we would visit in Kinnaur.

Almas and Jeet wasted little time in getting started and for the first time on our trek we looked forward to a new routine where our loads would be carried by mules rather than porters. 'They can sleep in your tent,' I joked with Jeet as our trusted cook related to Almas that the Tarik La was suitable for laden mules. Less than an hour after spreading the word that we needed mules Vikram Singh strode up the bazaar to meet us. I immediately sensed that he was not your average mule attendant. Judging by his gait Vikram seemed a man of substance who towered head and shoulders over my trekking companions. He had five surefooted mules at the ready, and was willing to leave that day. In no time rates were agreed and the mules were led off to a paved courtyard where they were loaded with our assortment of tin boxes, tents, kitbags and enormous supplies of food that looked as if they would feed an army for a month.

Setting off by mid afternoon we ascended conifer forests and in the dwindling light established

our first camp at the entrance to a vast alpine valley. It was good to be camping again, while for Jeet it was an ideal time to find out what he could about our new companion.

‘Were you an army man?’ he asked Vikram.

‘No.’

‘Then, you were in the police?’

‘No.’

Other occupational options were also explored before Jeet finally asked, ‘Then why are you so fit?’

‘Village life,’ was the response.

The day-to-day agrarian routine ensured Vikram had his hands full. I had also been right in assuming that he was a man of substance. He owned fourteen mules, four cows and a bull. He also had three daughters and a son. For Vikram the payment he would receive for this short trek was incidental. It was simply an opportunity for him to catch up with friends in Spiti whom he had not seen since last season.

When Vikram left the cook tent Jeet could no longer contain what was really on his mind. ‘Why does he not eat my food?’

Normally Jeet would have cooked rice and dhal for everyone but Vikram had politely refused. For Jeet this was tantamount to an insult. It was not until later in the evening that Vikram explained to our inquisitive cook that he had been nominated by his village to serve the *depta*. As part of his dedication he had to prepare his own food—namely rice, chapattis and vegetables—for three years. It was a tradition common to many village communities in Himachal: one villager being chosen to serve the temple for life and another two chosen for three-year terms. This was Vikram’s third and final year.

After the exertions of the previous day there was no reason to rush the following morning. After a relaxing breakfast I set off along a well-defined trail that wound gradually across a broad alpine meadow. Sitting alongside a crystal clear stream, I watched as river chats with their distinctive white cap and bright crimson tails hopped from boulder to boulder. It was a moment I had unconsciously been looking forward to since leaving NH 22 and I made a decision there and then to have a short day. By lunchtime we had established camp in a meadow where lumps of blue primula and delicate purple gentians emerged from the winter snowmelt. On the far side of the valley silver birch trees were gaining their first green buds of the season.

We were not alone. At regular intervals villagers accompanying heavily laden mules moved past our camp. Every five years the Forest Department permits the villagers to gather herbal plants from the alpine meadows at the head of the Baspa Valley. It is a case of compromise—of balancing the villager’s traditional rights with the necessities of conservation. Today it seemed as if every villager was on the move. Beyond our camp we could see them scouring the highest slopes collecting droop, the root of the *Juniper indica*. After gathering, the root is dried out in the sun for a few days before being loaded on mules and taken to Kafnu. Once the root is cleaned it is beaten into an oil paste and sold to cooperatives before being taken to the processing factories at Ludhiana, Chandigarh or Amritsar for the manufacture of incense. According to Vikram the crop would be harvested for a couple more weeks until the onset of the monsoon rains.

The following day we completed a long, ambling trek across rich verdant meadows. The local shepherds were also on the move, leading their huge flocks of sheep and goats across the verdant pastures as they made their way to the base of the Tarik La. From a distance the flocks merged perfectly with the landscape, a scattering of small white boulders across the mountainside. At sunset the shepherds whistled and called as they slowly brought their flock back down to the shelter of the valley. In a few days’ time they would cross the pass and graze the flocks on the scant but nutritious pastures in the Pin Valley.

Over the centuries a close relationship has evolved between the people in Kinnaur and Spiti. In return for permitting the shepherds to graze their flocks, the villagers in Spiti bring their yaks over the Tarik La to purchase timber for building. It is a long-standing arrangement. Vikram told us that the villagers from Kafnu even risk fines from the Forest Department in order to secure timber for their neighbours from Spiti.

The next day it was our turn to cross the Tarik La. After a fitful night’s sleep I was pleased to be on my way. Yet even though the ascent through seemingly endless scree slopes was gradual it was by no means easy going. It was a bitterly cold morning and the wind stabbed through my



jacket. For the first time since setting out on my trek I wore every stitch of my warm clothing. Although a land rarely touched by rain, this day was an exception. Heavy, swirling clouds took care of any views. Only when the last of our mules reached the pass did the clouds momentarily part. As Almas fumbled for his camera I glimpsed an unfolding panorama of jagged peaks and barren ridges that gave way to steep scree slopes descending to an unseen valley floor. A stark and inhospitable landscape, here life was anything but easy.

After descending the scree slopes from the Tarik La my knees were aching and for once I felt more tired than elated to be in Spiti. I dropped well behind Almas, Jeet and the mule train before they at last established camp on a tiny meadow. Not content with the rigours of the pass crossing Vikram headed off to meet a couple of shepherds who had crossed the Tarik La the previous day. He returned with bad news. There had been an accident. The shepherds had been leading their flock over one of the nearby makeshift bridges when a wooden support had collapsed. Two sheep had been washed away by the torrent. For the shepherds it was a financially disastrous start to the season.

I woke just before dawn to the merest suggestion of a lightening sky. I could hear the sound of insects discovering a new day and the cry of lambs in a nearby enclosure. Getting out of my tent I zipped up my jacket to ward off a wisp of cold air in an otherwise windless valley.

In spite of our early start the shepherds were already ahead of us. This time they were taking no chances as they carefully led their flock over another makeshift wooden bridge. Although the water levels had dropped overnight the torrent was no less forgiving. There were over a hundred sheep and goats and each was wary of crossing. We had no option but to sit, wait and watch. After the final sheep had scurried across the bridge it was the turn of the shepherd dogs. These fearsome mastiffs were trained to scare off a marauding bear or pack of wolves, yet they were hesitant to venture over the bridge. We watched the first dog place its paw on a wobbly log before whining and retreating. It took some time before it could summon up the courage to have another go. Meanwhile the shepherds had continued on down the valley with their flock, apparently unconcerned about their dogs' plight.

'I'll fix it,' announced Almas, and with that, he jumped to the rescue. After securing the wobbly log he literally hauled the first dog onto the bridge. The others followed warily across. It was heartening to watch their progress. Tails in the air, they yelped for all they were worth before racing down the trail to catch up with the rest of the party.

How I missed my daughter's dogs, Rosie, a Border collie, and Toby, a golden retriever. Rosie would have taught those dogs a thing or two about keeping sheep in order, while Toby, although lacking in brain matter, would have forded the torrents without so much as getting his tail wet. If only I could have brought them with me. I could imagine their delight as they raised their noses in the air each morning, checking the smells and scents of countless alpine glades before barging into the cook tent and being spoilt to death by Jeet. Each night they would have settled as close to my sleeping bag as possible, dreaming of the prospect of the next day's walk. Almas shared my passion for dogs. He had two enormous mastiffs that guarded his mother's house in Naini Tal. At night they needed to be chained inside their kennel, as there was always the chance of being taken by a forest leopard.

Almas and I were spotted long before we reached the grassy plateau located directly opposite the village of Mudh, the highest village in the Pin Valley. As we ambled down the trail, Sonam Dolma, a stout jovial woman dressed in the typically Spiti attire of a long dark tunic with a colourful apron draped from her waist, waved us over. Before we could consider where to camp she motioned for us to sit on the bench outside her home. 'You are welcome to camp here,' she smiled, pointing to a grassy stretch just beyond her house.

Without any further discussion Sonam then went back inside. A few minutes later she reappeared with a thermos of hot sweet tea and a plate of salt biscuits. It was a fine start to our stay, particularly since we knew we would have to wait here for a few days before heading off again. It was 28 June and, according to our schedule, Prabhu Singh, the guide who had met us in the Sangla Valley a few weeks ago, was not due to arrive by road from Manali for another two days. Hopefully a new team of porters would accompany him from the Kullu Valley.

Pouring our tea, Sonam Dolma explained that her husband was away for the next week or so trying to secure a road construction contract. Between May and September they lived here in their summerhouse, although they often returned for a night to their house in the main village on the far side of the valley. As we waited for our mules to arrive Dolma's two young daughters, aged about four and six, appeared from the far side of the wall alongside the house. Dechen and Kundun, two ragamuffins with sunburnt cheeks and mischievous grins, were intent on being our local guides for the next couple of days.

For the talented photographer, Mudh's location at the base of a towering cliff face is pure

inspiration. At first light the rays of the sun quickly spread across the valley towards the village. For ten minutes the whitewashed houses are bathed in sunlight while the fields and the lower flanks of the cliff remain in deep shadow. Next, the sun's rays light up the deep green barley fields, providing a perfect sense of harmony in this otherwise barren landscape. At sunset the process is reversed. While the village and fields plunge into shadow the colours of the exposed rock strata intensify as the angle of the sunlight gradually drops against a sky already speckled with evening stars.

From my vantage point, the exposed strata bands seemed to form curves across the 1000-metre cliff face. They tell the story of recent geological evolution for even now the Trans-Himalaya are rising and forming. For some, the great views of the Himalaya are focused on the 8000-metre peaks. For me, the rocky outcrop above Mudh matches any view of Everest, a raw, confronting example of the Himalaya in the making.

The most obvious sign of change since I last visited the Pin Valley in 1995 was the new road to Mudh. To mark this milestone in the village's development there was a Public Works Department board at the entrance to the village bearing the simple, though incorrectly spelt, inscription: 'PWD MUD'. As a further sign of progress, there was now also a daily bus service to the administrative center of Spiti at Kaza, some 40 kilometres down the valley.

Just below our camp the dozen or so children from the nearby houses attended school. They sat in a row on the grass alongside the shelter of a stone wall, for most classes in the summer are conducted outdoors. Glancing over the wall I recognised Dechen and Kundun as they hurriedly chanted their tables. A young bearded teacher straight out of college leaned back on his plastic chair, whiling away the afternoon. For him this was just another day before he could return home. Travel was also on the children's agenda. After Year 8 they would have to catch the bus to Sangnam, about 12 kilometres down the valley, in order to complete their high school education.

After school the children headed to our camp. I could hear them coming a mile off, singing at the top of their voices.

'What is your name?'

'Where are you a-going?'

'What is your country?'

Even in this remote corner of the Himalaya, English is taught from a very early age.

Peering over my shoulder, the children expressed an immediate interest in my bird book. As I flicked through the pages, I pointed out the chukar partridge, made 'chuk, chuk, chuk' noises and gestured to the hillside. The children nodded excitedly before trying to identify the golden eagle and the lammergeier in the birds of prey section. Reaching the page on magpies they clapped their hands in excitement. The horned lark and kestrel were also given the nod of approval. After a while, they dispersed and I returned to my tent. A few minutes later I heard a 'chuk, chuk, chuk' outside but, judging by the giggles, I assumed they were not calls of the feathered variety. Unzipping my tent, I found Dechen grinning in pure delight at her impromptu version of the partridge.

After the chuckling had died down Dechen and Kundun slipped away. They had work to do. Whistling as they went, they scrambled up the hillside to round up the sheep, goats and *zhos*. It took them the best part of an hour to bring the animals back down to a stone shelter close to their house. Only when the last goat was pushed inside the enclosure was the day's work done. It was time for the dynamic twosome to clamber up the wooden staircase to the family's living quarters.

The sun hit our tent on the dot of 6am. The women and their daughters had been out since first light collecting animal dung in cane baskets carried on their backs. They would have walked for several kilometres up the trail to collect fuel for the day, a daily routine followed more out of ritual than abject necessity. Most families used kerosene stoves as well as an open hearth to cook their daily meals of *tsampa* accompanied by a liberal pouring of butter tea—a combination of rancid butter and stewed tea mixed together in a long cylindrical wooden churn. It tastes better than it sounds!

After a hearty breakfast of porridge and chapattis spread with honey I set off to climb high above our camp. The absence of a trail made it harder than I had anticipated but the rewards were there for the taking as the views panned out high above the Pin Valley. It is a stark almost confronting landscape that never fails to impress. At first it is surprising that a terrain seemingly devoid of rich vegetation can support any wildlife and soon this impression may be

born out by reality. During his travels in Spiti our Summer Rambler had been impressed by the number of ibex in a nearby valley. Nowadays, however, it is a different story. The ibex population has dropped to alarmingly small numbers that are of great concern to the wildlife authorities.

The Pin Valley together with a number of adjoining valleys is now part of the Pin National Park. Since the formation of the national park there has been a constant need to balance the interests of the villagers anxious to protect their flocks with attempts to preserve this fragile and arid environment. The dilemma is particularly acute in the Pin National Park as it supports one of the highest concentrations of snow leopards in the West Himalaya. Villagers claim to regularly see the snow leopard roaming the high ridges at the margins of the seasons, although they are reluctant to admit whether they have killed them when they prey on domestic stock in the vicinity of the village. It is a problem facing authorities and villagers both here and also in the more remote settlements in Ladakh and Zaskar that I would visit in the forthcoming months.

The day after arriving at our campsite was not a 'well day' for Jeet. The previous evening Almas and I had retired to our sleeping bags at a respectable hour leaving Jeet and Vikram to their own devices. Earlier in the day Vikram had purchased a bottle of *arak*, the locally made, concentrated barley wine. Judging by their laughter, Jeet and Vikram were already in high spirits after a glass or two. Later that night they acquired a further supply, let's say in excess of two bottles. The result was that Jeet was suffering from the worst hangover he'd had for years. The fact that Vikram had left early that morning without so much as a headache made Jeet feel even worse.

There was no respite to Jeet's discomfort as high winds blasted down the valley with such force that they ripped under the mess flysheet. I peeped out and noted that even the crows seemed to be flying backwards! Fortunately, by early afternoon the winds had subsided and Jeet retreated into his sleeping bag at the back of his tent. Almas and I left him to indulge his abject misery and headed across the valley to Mudh.

Crossing the not too stable bridge over the Pin River we climbed the trail to the village. The trail wound past small stone enclosures where crops of barley and potatoes were ripening. A large whitewashed *chorten* (a type of stone monument that is sometimes a reliquary) at the entrance to the village, together with prayer flags fluttering atop the roofs of the houses, served as a reminder of the region's ancient Buddhist heritage. The twenty flat-roofed, two-storey whitewashed houses were almost deserted. Even the two lodges built to accommodate the trickle of trekkers coming over the Pin Parbati Pass from the Kullu Valley were empty. With no prospect of tea we continued to a small monastery, a one-room temple just beyond the village that was securely locked. I would have to wait until I reached Ladakh in a month's time before I could visit another Buddhist monastery.

By late afternoon the village of Mudh had come to life. The villagers working in the fields had returned to their homes while a steady line of workers carrying picks and shovels straggled back along the dirt road. They were labourers employed on a development that will significantly change the character of the valley. The Himachal Pradesh government had recently given the go-ahead to extend the road beyond Mudh and over a pass close to the Tarik La, eventually linking up with NH 22 to Rampur and Shimla. The plan is for the new 'mountain highway' to bypass the present road from Kaza to Kinnaur and shorten the drive to Shimla by many hours.

During the day teams of Nepalese workers clear boulders and shovel dirt from the hillside. They work twelve-hour shifts with bonuses for good progress. There is no work-to-rule or 35-hour working week in this corner of the Himalaya. Junior engineers employed by the state government oversee the project, keen to cut their teeth in this formidable terrain. Within a decade there is every likelihood that the tiny village of Mudh will be transformed from a remote trailhead to a bustling overnight halt for trucks and buses heading to Shimla.

The following evening, the ramshackle bus from Kaza pulled in alongside the PWD MUD sign. In the distance I could see Prabhu Singh and six Nepalese porters busily offloading their gear from the roof of the bus. After checking that nothing had been left behind, they headed down to the wooden bridge and ascended towards our camp. Everything was going like clockwork. Tomorrow would be 1 July and we would commence trekking the next day to the base of the Pir Parbati Pass. If all went smoothly we planned to cross the pass and leave Spiti on 3 July.

As the ever-energetic Almas raced off down the trail to meet Prabhu I reflected on how the road developments would impact on the tightly knit community of Mudh. My thoughts were interrupted by merry laughter as Dechen and Kundun made further attempts to refine their impersonations of the chukar partridge. I wondered how they would cope with the rush of strange dialects when Mudh was placed firmly on every map. How this would affect their innocent lives was anyone's guess.

## **CHAPTER 7**

### **Traversing the Pin Parbati**

From the Pin Parbati Pass, I watched as our line of seven porters, two guides and a cook moved slowly across a vast snow plateau. Almas led: edging forward, prodding his ice axe in search of bottomless crevasses still concealed by the deep winter snows. The porters followed, occasionally sinking up to their knees as they broke the crust of the snow. From the pass it was hard to appreciate the scale of the mountains, the line of tiny figures dwarfed beneath the huge backdrop of peaks that defined this remote corner of the Himalaya. On this brilliantly clear morning we were again traversing the Himalaya range. The weather had been kind to us and by late afternoon we would reach our camp in the upper Parbati Valley. In two weeks, I reminded myself I would be in Manali.

Without notice Almas halted midway across the plateau. Our porters did likewise, dropping their loads onto the snow and sitting on the bright red kitbags. For me it was a signal to catch up. Repacking my camera into my rucksack, I took one last look back over Spiti and commenced my descent from the pass. Ten minutes later I had caught up with Almas and the team. 'It's a long way down,' I remarked. Almas nodded, for although it was a clear morning there was every chance of a storm before we reached camp. An hour later we had traversed a series of broad scree slopes devoid of any obvious trail. We did not stop. For a further hour we kept up a steady pace until we reached a grassy knoll affording a bird's-eye view of the Parbati Valley. Ahead of us was a steep gully that offered few concessions to the knees. The porters talked among themselves, unsure of the way down. There was no trail, just a series of rock and boulder ledges that tested the less sure-footed. Gingerly I commenced the steep descent, fully aware that one slip would result in a broken ankle or worse.

My knees were trembling by the time I reached the bottom of the gully. Ahead was a sea of glacial moraine with no obvious signs of a trail. That was not surprising as boulders the size of suburban houses were strewn across the broad valley. We would just have to figure out a route as best we could.

The biggest hazards were the river crossings. In the morning the side streams flowing from the snowfields were easily fordable. However, by mid-afternoon they turned into raging torrents. At one point the porters searched for a spot at which to cross before leaping from one slippery boulder to the next. When my turn came I froze. In spite of my sturdy boots I could not summon the courage to cross. I waited for what seemed an age before taking the first mighty leap. Balancing on a boulder scarcely protruding above the swirling torrent, I felt my adrenaline pumping before I took another leap to the safety of the opposite bank. With seemingly endless reserves of energy the porters then forged ahead, leaving Jeet and I to follow at a more sedate pace.

By the late afternoon we could not resist the temptation to take a short cut across a vast alluvial river flat. It was a fateful decision. At first Jeet and I quickened our pace and believed there was every chance we might even pip the porters to the campsite. But then we hit trouble. The sand became softer and more waterlogged. Common sense did not prevail; we were after all only a few hundred metres short of camp. In places we sank up to our ankles in the soft sand. Then the situation deteriorated further as Jeet sank into sand up to his knees. Between our campsite and us was a treacherous stretch of quicksand. I couldn't believe it and, judging by the strained expression on his face, neither could Jeet. We beat a hasty retreat, accepting that we had another 2 kilometres ahead of us before we could take off our rucksacks.

On reaching the tiny meadow beyond the river flat the porters made themselves comfortable in an abandoned shepherd hut. Unfolding their thick woollen blankets they sang among themselves as if they had just completed an afternoon stroll. Without doubt they were the finest team we had engaged. From the Jumla district of western Nepal, they travelled to the Kullu Valley each season in search of work. Some had crossed the pass before and were aware that the hardest day of the trek was over.

In the mess tent the mood was more sombre. Prabhu Singh had not anticipated the long day and was fit to drop. After leaving us three weeks ago in Kinnaur he had returned to work in the Delhi office before taking a few days' leave. A week ago he had attended a family wedding in Rajasthan. Since then he had been on the move, travelling first by overnight bus from Delhi to Manali to recruit the porters before accompanying them by bus and jeep to reach Mudh. The

two-day trek from Mudh to the base of the Pin Parbati Pass had not been sufficient for Prabhu to recover from the excesses of the wedding. The result was one less-than-happy trek guide.

'Don't you stop for lunch?' was one of his more audible remarks.

'We had a packet of biscuits on the pass,' Jeet chimed in. 'Is that not good enough for you?'

As Prabhu muttered exactly what Jeet could do with the packet of biscuits, I considered Prabhu's true nature. While Prabhu had worked as a guide for many seasons he could not be described as a man of simple tastes. To say he loved his food was an understatement. In his youth he had been nurtured on the delights of Rajasthan cuisine that would have been on offer at least three times a day.

'You can bring your wife to cook for you on your next trek,' I laughed, as we passed around a well-deserved bottle of Old Monk rum.

The following day we headed down the upper reaches of the Parbati Valley. After about 10 kilometres we reached a huge boulder wedged into the riverbed that forms a natural bridge over the Parbati River. It is known as the Pandu Bridge for, according to the famous Hindu epic, the *Mahabharata*, the Pandavas brothers clambered over this boulder when making their way north to Spiti and Tibet. Over time a rock staircase has been built to ensure that mere mortals like us could also cross the turbulent waters of the river.

An hour below the Pandu Bridge we established our camp at the idyllic meadow of Thakur Khan. After the efforts of the previous day I was glad to take it easy and, in particular, delve into the pages of my wildflower guide. Indeed, the wildflowers in the upper Parbati Valley— the clumps of mauve and blue gentians, the purple primulae, the variety of potentillas, geraniums, delphiniums set amid a carpet of bright yellow anemones and ranunculaceae (the buttercup family)—would rival the fabled 'Valley of the Flowers' in Uttaranchal.

My interest in wildflowers had come at a mature age. While my father would spend endless afternoons pruning roses and tending chrysanthemums in our suburban garden in South London, I had had other interests. Gradually, friends and fellow trekkers had encouraged me to take at least a casual interest in botany. With the best-known species I had little difficulty. For the other 95 per cent I would consult *Flowers of the Himalaya* by Adam Stainton and Oleg Polunin. I had by chance met the British botanist Adam Stainton in 1976 while camping close to the Amarnath Cave in Kashmir. He had seemed utterly content compiling his log at a time when I was enjoying my formative years in the mountains. Although we did not meet again I later sent him my brochures. He very thoughtfully replied, encouraging my youthful endeavours to promote trekking holidays.

Just beyond the flowered meadows of Thakur Khan was a recently abandoned dam site. Since the commencement of the project in 1994 many engineers and teams of Nepalese labourers had been employed on the construction of the dam. Cartloads of reports were compiled before it eventually transpired that the dam was not viable and a halt to the work was finally called in 2002. In the interim many of the worker's shelters had collapsed under the weight of the winter snows, leaving behind an unsightly mess of discarded timber beams and twisted lengths of corrugated iron.

A map of the region showed that the dam construction was just outside the perimeter of the Great Himalayan National Park, a vast area established in 1984, that includes the upper reaches of the Parbati Valley. For now there was an opportunity for the area to regenerate, although there was always a possibility that work could recommence. A new project located at the confluence of the Tos and Parbati rivers, about 20 kilometres down the valley, was well underway and huge trucks and machinery were clearing the mountainside in order to create one of the largest dams in the region.

During the initial stages of planning my trek I had accepted that at some point I would be subject to the heavy monsoon rains. I had no option if I was to include sections of the Parbati and Kullu valleys on my traverse. That time was fast approaching. During the afternoon ominous storm clouds had formed and the following morning low cloud drifted up the valley, gently embracing the alpine slopes. Within the hour the rain bucketed down turning the trail into a quagmire. The porters covered their loads as best they could with thick plastic sheets that they tugged over their heads to gain some respite from the elements. The continuous sheets of rain combined with the fact that my glasses were perpetually fogged up compounded my discomfort. By the time I reached the sacred hot springs at Khir Ganga several hours later I was soaked to the skin.

I was in a pensive mood. On my previous visit to Khir Ganga almost a decade ago I had camped in an attractive meadow ringed by deodar, silver fir and mixed oak. There had been a small

*dhaba* just below the hot springs. How things had changed. A sprawling eyesore of makeshift *dhabas* and wooden shacks now scarred the meadow. 'What have they done?' I exclaimed.

'It's foreigners on dope,' replied Almas.

Later that afternoon I packed my towel and bathers and walked up to the hot springs. A trust comprised of village elders had appointed a manager to maintain the bathing area. He was doing a good job. The baths were clean and did not smell excessively of sulphur. The adjacent washing areas and the stone steps leading up to the Hindu temple just above the springs were also in good order and there was no end of signs to ensure that everyone behaved appropriately.

'No mixed bathing.' (There are separate pools for men and women.)

'No nude bathing.'

'No drinking.'

'No smoking in the immediate vicinity of the pools.'

Nothing, it seemed, had been left to chance.

Slipping on my bathers I immersed myself in the warm, invigorating water. I could just make out a snow peak high above the confines of the valley. Prabhu joined me and for a time we discussed our schedules. We would go our separate ways in the next few days. He would return to Delhi for a week before returning to Manali with a group of trekkers while I still had eight or nine days to go before crossing another pass to reach Manali. As I luxuriated in the warm waters my thoughts were interrupted by the sound of familiar voices. Any semblance of tranquillity was lost as Jeet, Almas and an entourage of porters clowned around, chasing and flicking their towels at each other as if they were at a public swimming pool rather than in the midst of the Himalaya. 'Let's have a bit of decorum!' I laughed, although I knew it was all to no avail.

Returning to my tent, I passed a group of European trekkers sitting in one of the ramshackle *dhabas*. Signs for pizza, Coca Cola, Pepsi Cola and a range of other European and kosher dishes catered for a trekking fraternity tired of endless rice and dhal. For me it was a culture shock. I had encountered more European trekkers in the space of an hour than I had seen since setting out from Gangotri six weeks ago. I needed time to adjust and retreated into my tent for the rest of the afternoon.

Unfortunately, the disparity in wealth between the European backpackers and, in particular, the predominantly Nepalese workers has resulted in some tragic outcomes. In August 2000, a Spanish woman, her son and her male British companion trekked a short distance beyond Khir Ganga to camp at the meadow of Bhoj Khan. That night they were attacked by a group of Nepalese workers who were making their way down the valley after working at the dam. Although it is not certain what sparked the attack, the Spanish woman and her son were killed while the British man was left for dead. It took several days for him to recover sufficiently to alert the authorities. While incidents of this kind are rare in the Himalaya they are not unknown. No longer is there an era of innocence. It is a sad reflection that even in the remote mountain valleys you need to be forever on your guard.

The following morning it took us only a few hours to reach the trailhead at Basholeo. It was time to say goodbye to the porters. Before the trek Prabhu had assured them that we would pay them for a minimum of twelve days. As we had only taken a week they were more than satisfied. Their bus departed on time and by nightfall they would be back in Manali about 100 kilometres away. A week later I would meet up with them again in Manali as they hovered around the interstate bus terminal pleading to carry bags for Indian tourists staying at nearby hotels. They had become resigned to accepting whatever work came their way.

Only a couple of hours' walk further down the bitumen road lay the sprawling temple town of Manikaran. I found it reminiscent of those temple towns dotted along the upper tributaries of the Ganges. Although most pilgrims are attracted to the hot springs here, they hardly compare with those at Khir Ganga. At 1770 metres the air is hot and humid and the exhaust fumes from trucks and buses—mostly displaying Punjab number plates—fill the stagnant air. Hotels, displaying signs advertising '24-hour supply of natural hot water', offer rudimentary accommodation. Most families stay for the night and divide their time between enjoying the hot springs and purchasing trinkets and religious souvenirs from one of the many stalls in the crowded laneway. Before departing they also offer their prayers at the *gurdwara*, or Sikh temple, its entrance guarded by several formidable Sikhs who ensure that proper conduct, including removing one's shoes and covering one's head, is observed within the precincts of the temple.

Although I have been to India many times I have still never quite adjusted to the fact that whenever you sit down—whether on a stonewall outside the *gurdwara* or on a train or bus—you are always the subject of attention. A sense of solitude, a need for personal space is something you relinquish as soon as your visa is stamped at Delhi airport. After a few tranquil days in the mountains I needed time to adjust once again to the trappings of Indian society. However, a tall, rather portly, Sikh perhaps in his forties, with a self-effacing smile and a red turban, eyed me as soon as he came out of the temple.

‘Gentleman, where are you from?’

‘Australia,’ I replied.

He then asked for my good name, my marital status and occupation; one-line openers that gave him time to assess my true being. Sitting next to me he inspected my rucksack, obviously concerned that I was not a man of means and might be in need of friendship. ‘You are going to ...?’

‘Manali,’ I replied, shrugging my shoulders.

‘But why are you walking?’ he enquired, mindful that a bus could get me there in a matter of hours. Yet before I could fathom a plausible answer (without going into too much detail) my new friend thought he had found a kindred soul.

‘I am walker also’ he nodded ‘Today it is good to feel God’. Without interruption he continued ‘The need for God is not that life’s purpose’.

‘Why not’ I replied mindful that I did not at this moment want a lecture on God, or how to reach him.

Then, just as I braced myself for a sermon the Sikh exchanged a firm handshake and returned to his family who were beckoning him to get a move on. I can only surmise how he would later relate as to how he befriended an aging hippy who had perhaps been out in the sun too long.

Heading down the 12-kilometre stretch of road to the village of Pulga, I looked forward to staying in a simple Forest Rest House and sleeping on a string bed or *charpoy*. But Almas and Prabhu had other ideas.

‘The Rest House is not available,’ they informed me when we met about a kilometre above the village.

‘Don’t worry, you will like what we have got you,’ they assured me.

I was suspicious, for I knew that this cunning twosome did not at times part with the complete truth!

Our simple abode for the night turned out to be a ‘deluxe hotel’ set in an orchard and with rooms that came complete with a colour TV and no end of Hindi movie channels. As I arrived Jeet was already using the remote control to flick from channel to channel. He was utterly content. With that I unpacked the contents of my kitbag and rucksack and stripped off my clothes in anticipation of a hot shower. I also remembered that the next day, 7 July, would be my fifty-sixth birthday.

‘Prem, *Namaste*.’ It was the only greeting I could muster with a horseman I had known for years. I knew something was wrong. Prem was not in good health. He looked frail, a gaunt figure, his eyes sunken and cheekbones pronounced. Perhaps the hardships of mountain life had finally taken its toll. At first I found it hard to accept that the man I was looking at had once accompanied me over so many high passes. ‘Not a problem,’ he used to say as he tilted his head to one side and faced the prospect of leading his mules over yet another new pass. But even now Prem had not let me down. Outside we could hear his young cousin Biro Negi offloading his five mules in the nearby orchard. Short, with boyish looks that concealed an incredible strength, Biro would become an integral part of our team over the next two months.

Early the following morning Prabhu and Prem bade us farewell and caught the bus to the Kullu Valley. As Biro and Jeet adjusted the mule loads, Almas and I shouldered our rucksacks and headed off down the road to Jari. For most Indian tourists the village is a convenient stopping place for tea as they drive from the Kullu Valley to Manikaran. However, for us it was where we would leave the road and head once again into the mountains.

Jari is the site of the Malana Hydro Electric Power scheme, a recently completed project that supplies electricity to many villages in the Parbati and Kullu valleys. It is also a security area, as concerns of sabotage have been stepped up in the last few years. I needed to show my passport

and register at the dam entrance. By the time I had jotted down all the necessary details, including my father's name, my occupation and next of kin, Jeet, Biro and the mules had caught up.

At just over 1500 metres the humidity was oppressive. It was not even 9am and the sweat was clinging to my back as I prepared for the days ahead. Jari marked the beginning of a steady 2000-metre haul over the Chandrakani Pass to the Kullu Valley and the hill resort of Manali. If all went to plan we would camp just above the dam wall that night before ascending to the ancient village of Malana the following morning.

As I walked up the road to the dam wall it was evident that the construction was complete. The Nepalese workers had left more than a year ago. Now there was an almost eerie silence. It took me time to realise that I could not hear the sound of the river thundering in the depths of the valley. Peering down I could see only a small stream trickling over huge boulders. Even the hillside seemed strangely silent. There were no birdcalls and the usually incessant sound of insects in the conifer forest was also missing. The only sound I could hear was the distant throb of a diesel engine in the vicinity of the dam wall. While developments of this kind provide villages with hydro electricity, there is certainly an enormous human price to be factored into the grand equation.

This was borne out sharply just two weeks later, on 16 July 2003. At around 2am a flash flood surged down the hillside to the tributary of the Kullu Valley not far from Malana, where I had been just days before. In its path were the makeshift huts and shelters of workers from Nepal and Bihar, some of whom would have worked a couple of years ago on the Malana dam. The shelters were swept away along with the roots of trees and debris caused by the endless mudslides. It was estimated that over 200 workers and their families had perished.

The following day the tragedy hit the headlines of the national newspapers. Bodies were recovered. ITBP personnel, together with local police and villagers, did their best to cope. Political leaders rushed to the spot to supervise rescue operations. Yet a few days later the news did not even warrant a mention. By now accusations were flying as to who was responsible. Environmentalists were up in arms. Why, they asked, did we need the dam at all? Why were the workers camped in such a vulnerable location? Contractors were held responsible while authorities were called to account as to why there had been a delay in mounting a rescue operation. Workers who survived complained that they had not been paid for months. Many had no option but to return to Nepal, an underclass with no means of redress and little access to emergency funds. A week later the death toll was adjusted. Reports maintained that no more than forty perished. The Forest Department was directed to ascertain the number of deodar and oak trees that had been destroyed. There was no further mention of the desperate state of the families...

The village of Malana comprises forty to fifty wooden farmhouses located about 500 metres above the floor of the gorge. For centuries its isolation guaranteed its cultural autonomy from the rest of India. Now it is just a few hours trek from the dam access road. Within a decade the road will extend to Malana as plans to build a dam above the village have already been approved.

The origins of the town are obscure. According to legend, it was established during the seventeenth century at a time when the Moguls were expanding their empire across the Himalayan foothills. Others argue that the community can trace its history to pre-Aryan times. Whatever its origins, the villagers of Malana maintain their own language and customs and worship Jamlu, a god who inhabits one of the Gyeaphang peaks in nearby Lahaul, in preference to Lord Shiva or any of the other more popular Hindu deities. They are also suspicious of outsiders. No outsider is permitted to touch a villager; to wear leather of any kind (although there seems to be no objection to leather hiking boots) or to touch the walls of the houses or temples dedicated to Jamlu. A Rs1000 (US\$20) fine is levied if you touch a temple wall.

Almas was in for a rude awakening. Having not visited Malana before he had little idea of what was in store for him. The early morning climb out of the gorge was particularly steep and when we reached the outskirts of the village tea was uppermost in our minds. Arriving at the village square, we headed to the nearest *dhaba* and went to pull up a wooden bench.

'Don't sit there!' the storekeeper barked, before motioning for us to shift onto two plastic chairs. 'What do you want?'

'Tea,' was our polite reply, somewhat taken aback by the 'warm' welcome.

The storekeeper relayed our order to his neighbour who brought over two lukewarm beverages served in plastic cups. It was the first time I had ever been served tea in the Himalaya in a plastic cup, but by now I was grateful for anything.



For Almas a break is not a break unless he also has a smoke so he pointed out his favourite brand of cigarettes. The storekeeper responded by reaching out and throwing the packet at Almas's feet. While we were aware that there are rules forbidding touching any villager, the manner in which the packet was thrown to the floor was downright insulting. Almas did not react, however. Instead, he politely placed his money on the ground, pleased at least to have a cigarette.

It didn't take long for Almas to give me a 'let's get out of here' look. However, while I didn't enjoy being treated as an untouchable, I was determined to sit things out. With Almas off on a wander I gently started up a conversation. After introducing myself to the storekeeper I asked his name.

'Why?' he said, before muttering 'C. L. Negi.'

After a long pause C. L. Negi composed himself and sat opposite me. Trying to make conversation was like getting blood out of stone until at last I enquired whether he had been consulted about the dam to be built up the valley beyond Malana.

'No. What choice do we have?' was his gloomy response. It seemed that C. L. Negi was resigned to whatever happened. He appeared unquestioning of how the technological developments would impact on this most ancient of cultures. Perhaps he believed that Jamlu would somehow intervene? If not, then he would have to accept the inevitable.

Perhaps a more significant reason for so many villagers to be wary of outsiders is that Malana is a renowned location for growing cannabis. Indeed, a huge crop was drying out in the village square right below C. L. Negi's store, under the watchful eye of several emaciated foreigners. This abundance of cannabis does not escape the notice of the state authorities either. Rumours are rife. Police informers among the villagers themselves are not unheard of, with the result that no one it seems is completely trusted. I was glad to leave.

A few hours' trek above Malana is the summer settlement of Dadru, set amid ripening fields of corn and a healthy crop of cannabis. Almas and Jeet were way behind and by the time Almas caught up I had decided on the campsite for the night. As Almas approached he looked hot and tired.

'We will camp over there,' I asserted with authority, aware that Almas had not been this way before. Almas passed me without saying a word.

'Did you hear me?' I yelled in his direction.

Almas raised his hand in acknowledgement. He had had enough for the morning. And that, in spite of all the pass crossings, inclement weather and daily frustrations, was the sum total of our most heated argument during the two months we trekked together.

Camping alongside the rushing Malana River I wondered whether the weather would hold for us to cross the Chandrakani Pass the next day. It was not to be. After ascending the forest above Dadru, we observed thick monsoon clouds billowing up the Malana Valley. We had little choice but to make camp as the first heavy rains fell with a vengeance.

Later that afternoon the clouds cleared and I walked above our camp. At the head of the valley the peaks of the Pir Panjal merged with the main Himalaya range. It was a spectacular alpine vista that reminded me of Kashmir. I wondered what lay ahead for me in the next few months. With a sense of elation I viewed the glistening peaks enclosing the Parbati Valley, while below me the forested ridges above Malana village soaked up the late afternoon sun.

## **CHAPTER 8**

### **A Sojourn in the Kullu Valley**

From my camp high above the Kullu Valley I could appreciate an almost 360-degree panorama of the mountain ranges. To the east were the high peaks of the Himalaya, while the snow-capped summits of the Pir Panjal Range stretched along the northern horizon. Directly ahead of me, a further line of peaks formed the Bara Bhangal Range. Below these ranges, hanging glaciers and moraine fields gave way to alpine meadows and bands of conifer and oak forest that gradually merged with a scattering of villages surrounded by deep-green rice paddies.

The previous day we had crossed the Chandrakani Pass (3650 metres), our seventh pass since we had set out from Uttarkashi. It was by far the most accessible and had put us within a few days of reaching Manali, the thriving town in the upper Kullu Valley. By good fortune we were ahead of schedule. Almas and Jeet could look ahead to a welcome break in Manali before returning to Delhi while I would be able to enjoy a week's rest before continuing my trek. I looked forward to loosening my bootlaces and finding a tailor to mend my favourite cotton shirt, which had already been patched by the finest tailors in Uttarkashi, Sankri, Sangla and Kalpa. I also needed to increase my waistline. Thanks to Jeet and our basic diet I had never felt better, yet the two months of exercise had taken their toll and the shorts that fitted me in Uttarkashi were now wallowing below my knees.

For Jeet, our camp high above the Kullu Valley provided an opportunity to visit the nearby Gujar shepherd encampment and purchase supplies of fresh milk, yoghurt and ghee. Being a proud buffalo owner himself he had set off as soon as our camp was established but returned soon after with his tail between his legs. He had not got 'mate's rates'. The Gujar had already spied the *angrezi* tent and had demanded an outlandish Rs200 (US\$4) for a kilogram of ghee, nearly double the rate that Jeet was prepared to pay. However, within an hour the Gujar had come over to our camp and had settled in Jeet's tent. There was no ill feeling as Jeet held court to his new captive audience.

Soon after, a herd of twenty-six buffalo—I counted them—lumbered past the mess tent. As the clouds billowed up towards the pass two of the Gujar shepherds wrapped in woollen blankets led the buffalo to nearby pastures. They would follow the same daily routine until early autumn when they would migrate slowly down to the Kullu Valley.

Within a day or two of joining us, our mule attendant Bir 'Biro' Singh Negi had become part of our team. His easy going nature, his ability to take each day as it came as well as his skill in leading his mules almost anywhere would prove an invaluable asset over the next two months. Biro lived with his brothers and uncle Prem Chand in Raisin, a village situated directly below our camp, about 20 kilometres south of Manali. Now in his late twenties he had married a woman from the nearby town of Mandi. They had recently separated, with his wife having custody of their six-year-old son. Biro now focused on making a living. The trekking season is short and he was pleased that I had engaged him and his five mules at least until the end of August. For Biro it would ensure a lucrative season. After a lull in our conversation Biro pointed to Jeet and Almas. 'You will be changing your "batteries" in Manali!'

I looked at Biro in bemusement as I contemplated life without my famous twosome. I knew it would take me time to adjust to the change.

Our rest day, spent just below the Chandrakani Pass, did not live up to expectations. Over the past week, Almas and Jeet had listened to my accounts of the wondrous views from this unrivalled campsite. But soon after our arrival the sun disappeared behind a huge wall of cloud. A sudden downpour left no doubt that the monsoon was upon us. Instead of savouring the mountain views Almas and I spent most of the day wrapped in the warmth of our sleeping bags or scurrying to and from the mess tent for cups of tea and company.

Cocooned in my sleeping bag I wrote up my notes, while Almas snored intermittently in the next tent. Between dream times he read a magazine that he had acquired from the hotel at Pulga. By late that afternoon he could recite the name, age and political affiliation of most of the Indian Parliament. The fact that he had no interest in politics was beside the point. 'I have nothing else to read apart from your wildflower book,' he moaned.

In contrast the day passed quickly for Biro and Jeet. Both shared an unlimited love of gossip. In

particular, Biro had a knack of embellishing his stories that had both Jeet and the resident Gujars in stitches. In another era Biro would have been a character in Chaucer's tales, expounding on his life in the mountains as he recounted tales of nights on high ridges searching for his mules and times when he had discovered rich grazing meadows that would have left the Gujars green with envy.

I was out of my tent the next morning just as the sun touched the peaks directly in front of me on the far side of the Kullu Valley. A few minutes later the 6000-metre summits of Indrashan and Deo Tibba lit up in glorious succession to the north of our camp. Heading down the vast alpine pastures I glimpsed the town of Manali and the Rhotang Pass before dark clouds billowed once more up the Kullu Valley. Heavy rain from the previous day had made the trail muddy and slippery. More than once my ski pole was all that prevented me from skidding onto my backside. Quickening my pace, I entered a forest of blue pine and spruce with fine stands of oak, hazel, maple and horse chestnut as I made my way down to the town of Naggar. As I checked my altimeter, I noted that this would be the last time I would trek below 2000 metres until I reached Kashmir in three months time.

After having traversed some of the most rugged and spectacular terrain of the Indian Himalaya it came as a shock to my system to enter an English country garden just above Naggar. I paid the small entrance fee and then walked along a path through manicured lawns and herbaceous borders to the Roerich Gallery. Nicolas Roerich was an enigma in the Kullu Valley. Living in Naggar from 1928 until his death in 1947, he had been an artist, a philosopher, a visionary and a confidant of many Indian philosophers and politicians. Roerich was acclaimed as one of the great creative figures of his time, recognised and befriended by leading musicians and artists who travelled regularly between London, Paris and St Petersburg in the early twentieth century. Born in Russia in 1874, he had left his homeland following the Russian revolution and lived briefly in Finland and England before settling for a while in the USA where he founded his Institute of the Arts. In 1923 he sailed for India before undertaking 'Altai Himalaya' between 1926-28, an expedition that inspired many of his works now on display in this gallery.

It was apparent that his landscapes drew inspiration from well beyond the Kullu Valley. His canvases reflected the dramatic sense of light found in the Trans-Himalaya of Ladakh and Tibet. There was little place for fields or trees and only rarely had he included a yak train, a fort or a monastery. Apart from the occasional gathering of Buddhist monks, human figures were rare.

Many months later, while trawling through a website dedicated to Roerich's paintings, I noted that few of his canvases were completed close to home. Of the forty-three paintings entitled 'Himalayas' only a couple were from the Kullu Valley. I found only one that could possibly have been painted from Naggar, 'Krishna—Spring in Kullu', and yet even here the trees were covered in a thick hoar frost and set in an otherwise barren landscape. I could only surmise that Roerich would rather have travelled for weeks to the lands of the Trans-Himalaya than trekked for a day to gain the wondrous alpine vistas from the Chandrakani Pass.

While I lingered in Roerich's garden, Almas had gone ahead to book rooms in the historic Naggar castle, a medieval building with huge stone ramparts set on the cliff top several hundred metres above the Kullu Valley. It had recently been converted to a hotel with rooms that more than satisfied our Spartan needs. By the time I reached the hotel, Almas had reserved a couple of rooms that afforded a bird's-eye view over the upper valley. The castle dated back to the sixteenth century and the reign of Raja Sidh Singh who established Naggar as the capital of the Kullu Valley. It remained as the seat of power for well over a century and even when the capital was later transferred to Sultanpur (nowadays known as Kullu) some 20 kilometres down the valley, the castle was still used as the summer headquarters well into the nineteenth century.

Sitting on a wide verandah overlooking Naggar's paved courtyards and narrow alleyways I felt like a king—'Raja Weare'. However, my reign was abruptly interrupted by a steady flow of Indian tourists who chose to ignore the 'No entry except for residents (and rajas!)' sign at the entrance to the verandah. At first I took the invasion of my regal privacy in good nature, I was after all back on one of the main tourist routes in northern India. But when a self-important, vociferous tourist decided to unbolt my door and check out my room that was too much for Raja Weare. Before my inquisitive friend knew what was happening I had shoved him out of my room and halfway over the verandah. 'We should have a bloody guard dog here,' I barked, quite the indignant ruler, while Jeet and Almas did their best to contain their amusement.

As the main throng of tourists headed off to lunch I wandered through the castle to the recently renovated Jagti Patt temple. The temple was regularly attended by the more devout villagers, who paid homage to a large slab of rock within it. According to legend, the rock was transported to Naggar by a swarm of bees to remind a young princess of her home near the base of the Rhotang Pass.

By late afternoon tranquillity had returned. As I sat outside my room, the resident manager joined me, keen for me to hear a tale that he no doubt told many of his guests. 'Do you know about the resident ghost?' he asked.

'Tell me more,' was my immediate reply.

The manager needed no further prompting. 'It is said that one day a group of musicians and dancers were invited to perform here. At the end of the performance the Raja asked his favourite Rani to nominate her chosen artist. But the queen answered a little too quickly for the Raja's liking and, suspecting a liaison, he ordered the immediate beheading of the dancer. In shock the Rani rushed out of the courtyard and around to your verandah, throwing herself over the balcony to her untimely death.'

'So that was it?'

'Oh no Sir, there is more.'

Now that the manager had my attention he wanted to ensure that I noted his every word. 'Sir, it is said that our Rani still roams the verandah outside your room on moonlit nights.'

'And tonight it is almost a full moon?'

'Why not?' was the manager's mischievous answer.

Although it might be justifiable at this point to describe a willowy figure pacing the verandah around midnight, I feel compelled to tell the truth. That night I heard no creaking wooden floorboards or rattles on my window; or, if there were, they did not interrupt Raja Weare's very sound sleep.

Setting a mean pace the next day it took me only a couple of hours to reach the ancient village of Jagatsukh, another former capital of the Kullu Valley. Although there were no spectacular castles there was no shortage of ancient temples. These included the Sandhya Devi temple built in the early fifteenth century at a time when the Raja's kingdom extended far beyond the Kullu Valley.

The chequered history of the Kullu Valley had fascinated many British officials including A. F. P. Harcourt, the Assistant Commissioner in 1869. The Kullu Valley was his passion and there was scarcely a mountain tributary, temple or rock carving that escaped his attention. Yet he did not stay on. The posting in the Kullu Valley was his last before returning to retire in England. His legacy was his notable account of the ebb and flow of 'Kooloo's' fortunes. Throughout its early history the prosperity of the Kullu Valley was subject to the forces of Ladakh and its neighbours, including Lahaul and Spiti. During the seventeenth century Kullu came under the influence of the powerful Moghul emperors. Following the Moghuls, Sanser Chand, the ambitious Raja from Kangra, asserted his rule before Kullu became subject to the Gurkhas who were intent on expanding their kingdom well beyond the borders of Nepal. In 1839 it was the turn of the Sikhs who wished to establish a vast Himalayan kingdom. Following the Treaty of Amritsar in 1846, Kullu came under British rule, and shortly after setting up their headquarters at Dharamsala, the British installed an Assistant Commissioner at Naggar to oversee their administration.

For Harcourt and so many of his contemporaries the Kullu Valley was an up-and-coming destination for retired British army officers and officials attracted by the bracing climate and the abundance of wildlife and sport. If you search the archives it is not uncommon to discover black-and-white photographs of the British Indian Civil Service officers enjoying life in the Himalayan foothills. Sometimes an officer is seen with hand on rifle, standing alongside a recent trophy—perhaps a deer or black bear. At other times he is pictured on a tour of duty, sitting on cane stools at the entrance to a large canvas tent, on the outskirts of a remote village. His tin trunks carry provisions, and documents are packed beside him, while the *charpoy* is out of view in the recesses of the tent. Staring into the camera, the sahib's gaze is always one of contentment, reflecting a lifelong passion for the mountains. By late afternoon he would have been looking forward to his pipe and probably a tot or two of whisky before a succulent curry. It was a life I could relate to. If born in a different era I would gladly have swapped any material comforts for a life in the hills. I could not think of anything finer than undertaking a tour of duty, trekking and camping in idyllic locations for weeks at a time where, after a day's work, I might rest and contemplate the mountain world at large.

By the 1870s many British families had settled in the valley. At first they turned their hand to growing tea but they could not match the plantations in the nearby Kangra Valley. It was the orchards, the apples, pears, plums and cherries that were to provide the long-term basis for their livelihood. English-style cottages were built and frequent sojourns into the mountains became part of their routine. For generations, the Kullu Valley was a haven. Unlike the nearby

hill stations of Shimla, Dharamsala and Dalhousie it was not reached by road. Everything was carried in on the backs of porters, preserving a way of life that was to last well into the twentieth century.

Some of the British settlers married into the local communities. One of the most famous was a Captain Bannon, who settled in the valley in the 1870s, when he bought up land for his orchards in Manali. Captain Bannon is credited with giving a kickstart to the apple business. In order to get his apples to the lucrative market in Shimla and beyond, he posted them. It was an ingenious solution. The service was guaranteed and cheaper than hiring porters and mules that could not always be relied upon. He married a woman from the Garhwal and had four sons who established the Bannon name in the valley. Future generations were to turn their orchards into guesthouses that are still run by his grandsons and great grandsons.

Yet the upper Kullu Valley with its almost Swiss alpine picture-postcard scenery has changed considerably since those days. Many settlers thought that the opening up of the road into the Kullu Valley in 1927 was the beginning of the end, but more recently the character of the valley, and in particular the hill resort of Manali, has changed radically.

From my vantage point above Jagatsukh, I considered how things had changed. Since 1990 an upsurge in tourism caused by the political problems in Kashmir had made a huge impact. Many multi-storeyed concrete hotels had been constructed, that were more suitable to Delhi or Mumbai than to the Himalayan foothills. Amusement parks had been built on the perimeters of the deodar forests; concrete shopping complexes had taken the place of the traditional bazaars and video arcades had sprung up like mushrooms to accommodate the needs of foreign and domestic tourists unable to cope with the serenity of the mountains. Traffic congestion was now an everyday occurrence; the constant blaring of horns a reminder that most of the narrow roads were not designed for buses or regular two-way traffic.

In a way I was apprehensive about staying for a week in Manali. I had sometimes advised friends to consider staying elsewhere—at Jakatsukh or even Naggar. Others decided that the nearby Old Manali or Manaligarh was the better option. Manaligarh was the last place before the Rhotang Pass where the mule trains could stock up on fodder. The settlement prospered until the 1962 Indo-Chinese war when a road was constructed over the Rhotang Pass. Tourist buses had now taken the place of the mule trains and each day hundreds of domestic tourists would take the bus ride to the pass. For many it would be the first time they would actually touch snow, which normally wouldn't melt until well into the summer.

Fortunately I had a reservation at one of the hotels run by the Bannon family. It was a haven from the noise and traffic of Manali even though it was less than a kilometre from the main bazaar. Walking down the bitumen road on those last few kilometres to town I had to jump to one side to avoid cars and buses passing at breakneck speed. Usually I would have got angry, but today I was in high spirits. Since planning my trek I had always maintained that if I could reach Manali in one piece then I would get to Kashmir. My first goal was in sight but I needed a break. I also needed a hot shower and to phone my daughter as well as time to catch up with some of my old friends.

'Where were you?' were Almas's words of welcome. There was no 'Can I get you a drink?' or 'Well done Garry, you have completed the first two months of your trek.' Instead, before I could even get my rucksack off I had to justify why, by his reckoning, I was an hour late. I could have kned him in the groin. Instead I meekly explained, 'Sorry boss, I had a cup of tea in Jagatsukh.'

'My God Garry, what's happened?' Henry Bannon was taken aback by my appearance as he strode through the hotel lobby. With my Santa Claus beard and a body lean enough to qualify for food rations, I could appreciate his concern. Henry looked well. His almost portly figure was in stark contrast to mine. At first glance he looked European, dressed in his woollen jacket and well-pressed trousers. In a classic novel based in India he would be described as 'old style', being part of an established family that felt little need to impress. Henry was a grandson of Captain Bannon. His father, Huw, had been one of four sons and held the distinction of serving in both world wars before retiring to his orchards. Henry now ran one of the family hotels and had other local business interests to keep him occupied. He was part of a family that had maintained a sense of dignity, almost aloofness, as they came to grips with the modern developments in the upper Kullu Valley.

That afternoon, sitting in the hotel garden, bird guidebook in hand, I ticked off kestrels, flycatchers and forketails, brightly coloured bulbuls and tits. The much-maligned mynahs were commonplace while a variety of goldfinches, bullfinches, robins, cuckoos, jays and thrushes provided a reminder of how English the valley was amid the willow trees and apple orchards. Every hour or so I would order yet another pot of tea. There was even the prospect of locally caught trout washed down with an iccold beer. I felt I had earned my indulgences. I was so comfortable I did not move out of the hotel on that first day.

The following day it was time for Almas and Jeet to leave. They had to report back to the Delhi office and were resigned to the prospect of a fourteen-hour overnight bus ride. However, at least they knew they would be back: Jeet in a few days' time and Almas a couple of weeks later when he would lead a group across the high passes to Ladakh.

Although my old 'batteries' were now in Delhi I was not short on company.

'We were going to meet you at Naggar but no one knew when you were arriving.' With that Iqbal Sharma and I exchanged bear hugs to prove to each other we had not lost any strength or affection over the years. Iqbal ran one of the longest established travel agencies in Manali and was gearing up for a busy season. He and I had known each other since the early 1980s. I can still remember his debonair, energetic figure striding onto my houseboat ready to lead a trek for me. It was a mutually advantageous arrangement. I was able to employ a highly experienced guide, while he needed little excuse to spend as much time as possible in Kashmir. Indeed Iqbal's family was originally from Baramulla in Kashmir and had moved to the Kullu Valley several generations ago. Even today they still had distant relatives in Kashmir. As our friendship evolved, Iqbal introduced me to some of the fine treks out of Manali. For weeks at a time we would hike through remote valleys and over little-known passes. Above all it kept us trim. Today Iqbal was a proud grandfather and had grown a little thicker in the girth.

Each day I visited Iqbal's office to access my emails. We would then talk over old times before exchanging lighthearted banter throughout the hottest hours of the day. 'So Garry,' Iqbal would start, 'what next after you get to Kashmir?'

'That will be enough for me,' I replied, not wishing to think beyond the time when I would reach my houseboat.

During lulls in the conversation we reflected that we had not seen enough of each other. I could still recall spending a few weeks with him in Manali in 1990 when Himanshu, his eldest son, was still a teenager; now he was a 29-year-old father.

Not wanting to forsake my hard-won fitness level, I walked for several hours each day. From my hotel I would take a short cut to the deodar forest immediately west of the township. For these fine stands of timbers we had the efforts of one of the early Indian Civil Service officers to thank. His creative regulations—designating the trees as religious monuments—ensured that only a few of these magnificent trees were felled for construction.

Located in the midst of the deodar forest is the famous Dughri temple dedicated to Harimba, the most influential goddess in the Kullu Valley. The temple built in 1553 by Raja Bahadur Singh, the son of Raja Sidh Singh, who built the castle at Naggar. It is constructed in pagoda style with four distinct roof levels. An impressive entrance decorated with ibex horns and wooden carvings depicts a variety of local deities.

Even in the early morning a handful of Indian tourists mopped their brows after their short walk up from the bazaar. Gathering at the precincts of the temple, they removed their shoes and rang the brass bell at the entrance to the temple before entering to pay their respects to Harimba. After completing their devotional duties, the tourists returned to holiday mode. Heading around to the nearby amusement park their children squealed with delight as they rode colourful steel horses, ate popcorn and stood to attention while their picture was taken in *pahari* dress. Others wanted to sit on one of the yaks that had been brought down from Lahaul, unaware that the animals found it hard to survive for even a few months a year at altitudes below 3000 metres.

Just above the deodar forest is Duff Dunbar, a grand residence built in the *pahari* style with dry stone and cedar beams to accommodate a highly respected Forest Officer in the 1860s. Some years ago, friends of mine had taken out a lease on Duff Dunbar. They still reminisce about those heady times and those splendid views of Manali and the upper Kullu Valley from the upper-storey verandah. In the last few years the residence had been sympathetically renovated, although some of the adjoining orchards had been cleared for new development.

During my morning constitutional I could not escape the Kashmir traders. 'Looking is free,' was the catchphrase of these most insistent salesmen hovering outside their showrooms. Many had set up business in Manali since 1990 and were ever hopeful that I would purchase a fine shawl or even an intricately woven carpet that would be just what I needed to cover the floor of my nylon tent! By contrast, the local storekeepers were happy just to pass the time of day, satisfied that the season had so far exceeded expectations.

A highlight of my morning walk was to check my weight. Although I was fully aware that I had lost at least 10 kilograms since leaving Uttarkashi, I could not walk past a pair of scales strategically placed on the side of the road. The owner was a young girl barely old enough to go to school. Her sales pitch was her winning smile. Although the scales were clearly in need of

repair my Rs 5 (US10 cents), (the going rate was Rs 1) ensured a delightful 'Bye' Bye' that would see me through the rest of the day.

At some point on my daily rambles I would end up at a Buddhist monastery just below the main bazaar. It was the focal point for the Tibetan community in Manali. Since 1959 many Tibetan refugees had settled in the vicinity of Dharamsala, while others had settled in the upper Kullu Valley and in Manali. Although the Tibetan and Manali communities had lived here in relative harmony for the last forty years it will be a different story for the up and coming generations. New values are finding their way into the hills and teenagers in particular are keen to assert their identity as they come to terms with the seasonal influx of visitors.

Himanshu Sharma, the eldest son of Iqbal Sharma, is an example of an emerging generation of environmentally aware residents. 'Every time I returned from boarding school in Mussoorie' he told me 'it would take me a few days to adjust to the changes. What I saw was a wave of new faces from Kashmir, Punjab or Nepal in search of employment. It was a huge awakening for many of us unaccustomed to such pace of change.' Since then, Himanshu has been actively involved in environmental projects in the Kullu Valley.

'We have achieved some success but need to do more,' he continued, before outlining an ambitious yet simple plan whereby the local schools would 'adopt' one of the mountain valleys. Each class in the school would then take a month off each year to undertake a field project. As Himanshu so eloquently put it, 'It would be a great way to get the parents involved and develop a broader community awareness about our mountains.'

Later that afternoon Himanshu and I walked up the road to my hotel. Every few minutes he greeted friends and renewed acquaintances. His gentle manner was so like that of his father. These were tranquil interludes on my last day before setting off again on my trek. Standing at one side of the road, I could appreciate the forested slopes above Manali, while there was a constant sound of cicadas in the nearby deodar forest.

Keeping me company on the hotel verandah, Himanshu pondered his future. He had recently become a father and knew it held special responsibilities. 'It was the helicopter crash in April that really got me thinking,' he confided.

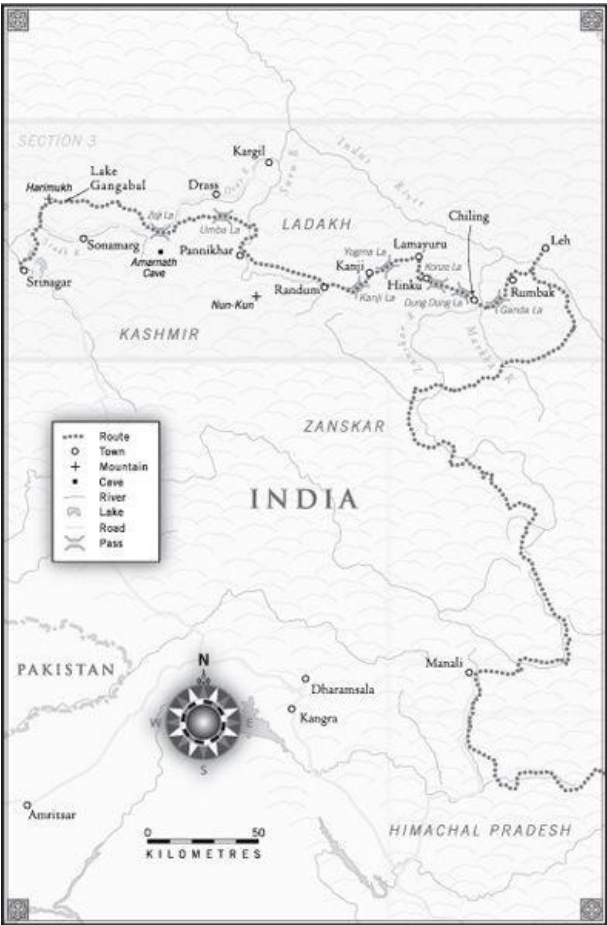
In April 2003, he was the reservation manager when a helicopter owned by World Expedition's (India) associate company crashed, instantly killing its pilot and passengers. 'I had waved them off minutes before they crashed,' he reflected.

Himanshu remained silent for a moment as he regained his composure. Gradually an air of optimism returned. 'I could have taken a job in Shimla or in Kathmandu or Delhi but I didn't.' Then he confessed that there was nowhere else he would rather live than right here in Manali.

Himanshu's reflections prompted me to reconsider my own views. Was I being too harsh in my assessment of the developments? Although few would deny that Manali had grown too rapidly in the last thirteen years, the mountain backdrop remained as enticing as ever. If Himanshu and his generation remained optimistic, then the future of the Kullu Valley would be in capable hands.

After Himanshu left I began to sort through my gear. There were books and a stock of film to send to Delhi. With the paperwork and mounds of receipts spread across my bed, I looked forward to getting back on the trail again. I had covered the first two months of my trek but still had another three to go. By my calculations there were still at least fifteen high passes to cross as I headed north to the Trans-Himalayan regions of Lahaul and Ladakh.

**Heading North to Leh**





## **CHAPTER 9**

### **In the Footsteps of the Gaddi**

Since late spring the Gaddi had been on the move. Huge flocks of sheep and goats blocked the road to Manali as the shepherds undertook their seasonal migration. No amount of horn blowing could shift the Gaddi as they constantly whistled and called their flock to order. The goats stood on their hind legs munching on the fresh shoots, while sheep nonchalantly nibbled the undergrowth as they wandered from one side of the road to the other.

For the Gaddi, shepherding is their life. It is their divine vocation, their *dharma*, as determined by Lord Shiva. They are a chosen race that on first appearances is yet to acknowledge the twenty-first century. Dressed in their distinctive *chola*—a knee length cloak made from home spun wool—that is tightened at the waist by a *dora*—a black wool rope—they make their way from their home in the Kangra Valley to their summer pastures. It is a journey that takes the best part of two months to complete.

I would follow in the footsteps of the Gaddi. For the next two weeks I planned to trek north, ascending the alpine slopes of the Hampta Valley. Crossing the rugged Pir Panjal Range I would then follow a trail to the Gaddi's vast grazing lands in Lahaul. It would be a fine interlude before heading over the Himalaya Range to the stark landscape of Ladakh.

After living for a week at 2000 metres in Manali I diagnosed myself with a case of reverse altitude sickness. It was a state of malaise that could only be attributed to a yearning to get back to higher altitudes. My two new 'batteries' were also keen to leave. There was Norboo my youthful Ladakhi guide who was never to be seen without his dark-blue fleece jacket, and Dilip Shrestha, a Nepalese cook in his early twenties who was as keen as mustard to prove his worth on the trail.

Jeet and Prabhu would also join us. They had returned from Delhi with a trekking group that would follow a similar itinerary to ours for the first few days. Jeet was in his element. This time he would be accompanied by a couple of helpers who would chop vegetables, erect the cook tent, do the washing, collect the fresh water and complete all the other camp chores, leaving him to hold court to anyone who would listen to his endless tales.

The group comprised seven trekkers who had signed up with the adventure travel company World Expeditions. They were a mixed bunch, from Australia, USA and UK with ages ranging from thirty-eight to sixty-five. All were driven by a quest to complete a challenging three-week trek that would ascend the Hampta Valley before traversing the high passes across Ladakh to the Indus Valley and Leh.

The group's motivation was as varied as that of the Indian pilgrims I had encountered two months ago. For some, the trek provided an opportunity to complete a challenging walk, to test themselves as they crossed a series of 5000-metre passes. For others, the attraction was the Buddhist culture, to savour the lunar-like landscape of Ladakh, or an opportunity to reassess values in otherwise hectic lives. For a few, the result would be surprising. I have known many unlikely candidates who have had their lives changed forever after just a few weeks in the Himalaya.

At first it took me time to adjust to walking with a group of strangers even though it was only for four days. In Manali I had had reservations about whether my experience would somehow be diluted; whether I really needed company or indeed if I needed company why had I not planned in advance for a few of my close friends to join me for a week or two during my trek. The truth was that I didn't have an answer. It was only after meeting the group briefly in the hotel bar in Manali that I had decided we would get on fine. Or so I hoped.

On the first day it rained steadily for most of the morning. 'Didn't say that in the brochure,' I heard them complaining as they slipped and slithered up the trail that wound high above the Kullu Valley. Fortunately for me the sun broke out just before we reached our first camp. Beaming with contentment—and relief—I watched as the group packed their rain jackets into their rucksacks and slipped on a colourful array of walking pants and hi-tech sweatshirts that would have delighted shareholders in outdoor gear shops.

For the next two days in the Hampta Valley the group followed an early to bed early to rise

routine as they adjusted to life on the trail. Breakfast consisted of huge bowls of hot porridge and plates of fried eggs that appeared at regular intervals around the flap of the mess tent. 'Please no more food,' was just the incentive Jeet needed to prepare a further stack of pancakes that would keep the group going until lunch. With kitbags packed they would then hover around the campsite, applying liberal amounts of sun cream to their marble-white limbs before Prabhu gave the signal to set off on the trail.

On these early days Jeet adopted Dilip, instructing him in the fine art of preparing rice and dhal and making sure that my tea was brewed to perfection. Dilip was a recent recruit to the company and was anxious to impress. He needed to make his mark as he had just got married and now had a wife to support. A huge grin spread across his youthful face as Jeet pronounced, 'Mr Garry, he is rice and dhal man.' How well, he'd put it!

On the third day out we reached the base of the Hampta Pass. It was a memorable day—one where the group realised that they were out to enjoy themselves and that their weeks or even months of preparation were being rewarded. Above the oak and conifer forests we followed a trail past stunted silver birch trees and across lush meadows carpeted with bright yellow buttercups and dotted with mauve and blue gentians. Delicate primula flourished along the watercourses. In the distance the silent white peaks of the Pir Panjal beckoned at the head of the valley. Amid this almost picture perfect setting the group were on their knees, photographing what is acclaimed as the most beautiful of all of the Himalayan wildflowers, the Meconopsis, or blue poppy.

Our third and highest camp in the Hampta Valley was known as Balu ka Ghera—the Den of Bears. It was an apt description, for above our camp the cliffs were riddled with numerous caves perfect for hibernating bears. While I had seen many bears on my treks throughout the Indian Himalaya I had never so much as glimpsed one in the Hampta Valley.

'Did I tell you how I came face to face with a brown bear when crossing the Chandrakani Pass? Or when I saw a black bear and her cubs in the Lidder Valley in Kashmir? Or about the bear with her cubs in the corn fields above Manali?' With looks of resignation Prabhu and Norboo were treated once again to my vastly embellished tales. Just when they thought I had finished I speculated whether bears lived in the caves above our camp during the summertime. 'Why don't you go and have a look?' I suggested, with the obvious inference that they would go ahead and I would follow. To my surprise they politely declined!

That night a storm swept up the valley. Flashes of lightning lit up the darkened sky. I counted the seconds as I waited for the ominous clap of thunder. The rain intensified, whipping around my tent. I snuggled further into my sleeping bag luxuriating in the thought that I was immune from the elements. My sense of wellbeing was heightened as the rain pounded my nylon flysheet until at last there was an uncanny silence. When the storm had passed I fell into a deep sleep that was only disturbed in the early hours of the morning by a stray shepherd dog howling on a distant hillside.

There was not a cloud in the sky the next morning. It was a perfect day to cross the pass. Leaving the group to finish breakfast, Norboo and I set off at a steady pace following a well-defined trail that wound across alpine meadows before ascending a series of scree slopes to reach the Hampta Pass (4210 metres). The views of the Pir Panjal peaks exceeded all expectations. The summits of Indrashan (6221 metres) and Deo Tibba (6001 metres) loomed high above the tumbling Indrashan Glacier—peaks that stirred the soul on this glorious, windless morning.

On the boulder-strewn meadow opposite the pass a series of cairns marked the Gaddi shepherds' spring migration. Primitive rock shelters left no doubt that they camped right on the pass. Amid patches of ripening grass clusters of bright yellow *Corydalis thyrsoflora*, tiny gentians and the robust white flowers of *Pleurospermum candollei* were emerging from the winter snows.

Removing our jackets, Norboo and I waited for the group to catch up. It was just the break I needed to consider the next stages of our trek through the region of Lahaul. By my calculations it would take three or four days to reach the first of the Gaddi encampments in the vicinity of Chandra Tal and another three days to reach the historic Bara Lacha La. We would then head to the base of the Zaskar Range before undertaking some of the most challenging stages of my trek across the high passes of Ladakh.

Lahaul has a modified monsoon climate and only the occasional rain cloud waters the scant undulating meadows where the Gaddi graze their flocks. This is 'Upper Lahaul', a vast landscape drained by the Chandra and Bhaga rivers that flow from opposite sides of the Bara Lacha La. Below their confluence is 'Lower Lahaul' where the Chandra and Bhaga rivers form the Chenab, one of the five main tributaries of the Indus.

A land the British administrators described as being 'beyond the habitable world', Lahaul's dry and rugged terrain may at first appear unsuited to human settlement. However, this is not the case. Many of its valleys support thriving communities that boast a long and rich cultural history. As with Spiti, Lahaul was converted to Buddhism during the eighth century. Not long after its conversion, Lahaul became part of the expanding kingdom of Ladakh, although in the following centuries it maintained some vestige of independence from its powerful northern neighbour. By the seventeenth century it was the turn of the Kullu Rajas to extract tribute before it became part of the expanding Sikh Empire. In 1846, following the Treaty of Amritsar, Lahaul came under the British administration that appointed a local ruler, a *Wazir*, from one of the powerful trading families in Kelong, the regional headquarters. The *Wazir* held a commanding position, overseeing the administration while exercising his right to retain most of the taxes collected by his subordinates. These included the grazing fees paid by the Gaddi during their annual migration.

From the summit of the Hampta Pass the group took time to appreciate the folds upon folds of the Himalaya Range, which stretched across the northern horizon. 'Which way do we go?' they asked, unaware that the pass they would cross was hidden from view. In a few days they would traverse the Shingo La, a well-trodden pass at the head of a small glacier leading to the Zaskar region of Ladakh.

A jovial English couple in the group asked which way I was heading. For them the three-week trek was a realistic goal, my five-month trek absurd. I scratched my head and vaguely pointed in the direction I was heading. 'You will waste away to nothing!' they exclaimed, inviting a barrage of one liners on what could motivate a 55-year-old Santa Claus figure to walk all the way to Leh, let alone Kashmir.

Four days after setting out from Manali we reached the Chandra Valley. It was time to bid farewell to the group, who would take a bus and drive for several hours to the village of Darcha before preparing to traverse the Shingo La. I also had to say goodbye to Jeet and Prabhu, who waved through an open window as the bus trundled down the dirt road. It was the last time I would see them until I returned to Delhi in October.

As soon as the bus was out of sight Dilip and Biro began to sort out our fresh supplies of fruit and vegetables, sacks of rice and flour, tins of cooking oil, tuna and processed cheese and packets of biscuits. It all needed to be repacked and loaded onto our five mules. Hopefully the supplies would last until we reached Padum, the administrative headquarters of Zaskar, in three weeks' time.

As soon as the mules were loaded I trudged off along a dirt road. I put my mind into neutral as I made my way to our camp on the tiny meadow of Chota Dhara. Just before the meadow were some Buddhist prayer flags. These marked the spot where, ten days' previously, a jeep packed with seventeen men, women and children had veered off the road into the swirling waters of the Chandra River. The families had been returning to Spiti after making a pilgrimage to the Trilikonath temple further down the Chenab Valley. None of the bodies had been recovered, including those of several people from the village of Mudh.

After an early start from Chota Dhara I headed up the Chandra Valley to complete the 20-kilometre stretch of dirt highway to a roadside *dhaba* at Batal. The *dhaba* was a convenient stopping point for the daily buses running from Manali before they negotiated the switchbacks over the historic Kun Zum La to Spiti.

By the time I reached Batal I was in dire need of tea. As I entered the low entrance it took time for my eyes to adjust to the darkened room where the *dhaba* owners—a young couple from Spiti—were preparing for the arrival of the 11am bus. At this time the passengers on the bus from Manali stopped for a short lunch break. Pots of rice, vegetables and dhal were at the ready. About forty passengers alighted from the bus, and in no time ladles of steaming hot food were served onto metal plates and it was down to the serious business of eating. This was not a social occasion. Conversations were kept to a minimum, with the exception of the high-spirited giggles from a group of women returning to Spiti. A helper filled jugs of water and served second helpings of rice, flitting from one table to the next in an effort to keep up. Glasses of hot, sweet tea were slurped and the last spoonfuls of rice were scraped off the plate. All eyes focused on the driver as he pushed his chair aside and walked out into the sunlight. As the bus engine revved up, the *dhaba* owners collected the modest payments of Rs25 (US50c) or Rs35 (depending on whether it was rice and dhal or rice, dhal and vegetables) plus Rs3 (US5c) for tea. Out went the passengers with just enough time to relieve themselves before the bus departed. Apart from the hissing of the kerosene stove the *dhaba* was left in silence.

Shortly after the bus departed Norboo, Dilip, Biro and the five mules finally came into sight. 'Did you catch the bus?' smiled Norboo as he sat himself down on the wooden bench outside the *dhaba*. What had taken them so long I will never know for within minutes of gulping down their

tea Biro and Dilip headed off to a secluded flat practically devoid of vegetation just above the road. For the lover of high places this camp would not rank highly. Yet for a geographer familiar with the complexity of the Himalayan ranges the peaks on the far side of the Chandra Valley are worth savouring. It is here that the Pir Panjal merges with the Himalaya creating many 6000-metre peaks that guard the broad sweeping glaciers, including the Bara Shigri, the largest in the West Himalaya.

In spite of the high daytime temperatures Batal is not immune to cold snaps. The early morning of 28 July 2003 was a case in point. For the first few hours I kept my fleece jacket tightly zipped as I followed a dirt track that diverted off the Manali to Spiti road and headed high above the Chandra River. It was only after weak sun penetrated the high cloud that I felt a modicum of warmth returning to my system. Well before midday I was within sight of the shores of Chandra Tal. Nothing can quite prepare anyone for one's first sight of these translucent waters. Nor are the lake's true dimensions immediately revealed. In fact, it was only when we reached the shoreline that we appreciated the lake was over 1 kilometre long and in places 1/2 kilometre wide, forming a great arc—hence the name Chandra Tal, the Moon Lake.

Aware that the dirt track had recently been extended to within a couple of kilometres of the lake I braced myself for signs of development. I need not have worried. Apart from the Gaddi shepherds we were alone. Indeed, it appeared almost unchanged from when I had first trekked there some twenty years ago. The Himachal Pradesh Forest Department is, however, keen to develop the lake as a major tourist attraction, although at present a few concrete steps on the north side of the lake are just about it. There are plans to construct tourist huts but it is difficult to predict when this might happen. At 4330 metres, the lake is twice as high as Manali, so while the road will afford easier access it will not lessen the likelihood of high-altitude sickness, as trekkers and travellers attempt to adjust to the lack of oxygen in the air. Hearing the distant calls and whistles of the Gaddi, I directed my gaze to the arid boulder-strewn landscape high above the lake. At first the flocks of sheep and goats appeared perfectly camouflaged and it was only when they reached the sanctuary of a tiny meadow that they could clearly be seen. Until the end of August this would be home for the Gaddi.

Rattan Chand's weathered features reflected a lifetime of living in the mountains. Sitting on his haunches at the entrance to Dilip's tent, he surveyed the comforts of our camp. Undoubtedly he was of harder stock than we trekkers. He belonged to one of a dozen or so families settled in the vicinity of Chandra Tal. Given that each family owned about 400 to 500 sheep and goats, it was one of the Gaddi's most popular grazing areas.

For Rattan Chand it had been a good season. Since arriving in early July he had not lost any of his flock and there had been no major calamities. To reach Chandra Tal the Gaddi had set off from Palampur—one of the largest towns in the Kangra Valley—in May, crossing a minor pass to reach the Kullu Valley. This was where Rattan Chand's patience had been stretched to the limit. 'Too many motors!' he insisted as he pretended to blast a car horn while covering his ears. Sometimes the Gaddi had walked all night to avoid the traffic.

Beyond Manali, Rattan Chand had ascended the Hampta Valley—although some of his relatives preferred to cross the nearby Rhotang Pass—before heading up the dirt road to the grazing pastures in the vicinity of Chandra Tal. His home while on the move was in a stone shelter or under a large rock overhang. It was a migration dictated by the elements, by the condition of the trails, the amount of snow on the passes and the number of torrents to ford. Distance was of little concern to Rattan Chand, even though he would have walked somewhere in the vicinity of 500 kilometres to reach his summer encampment.

On reaching Lahaul the Gaddi must pay Rs1/2 (US1c) per animal to the Forest Department for grazing. Although this is almost nothing when compared to the Rs30 (US60c) they pay to graze their flocks on the state land near Palampur, the Gaddi are wary of the Forest Officials. They consider the meadows around Chandra Tal their domain and are concerned that plans to develop the area in the vicinity of the lake will put increased pressure on their grazing lands.

Rattan Chand was unsure of his rights, even though the Gaddi have traditionally grazed these pastures since they first settled in Brahmaur in the Ravi Valley during the time of the Moghuls in the seventeenth century. Some historians even maintain the Gaddi first settled in the hills in the tenth century. With such ancestry, only an ill-advised department would try to undermine the Gaddi's time-honoured access to their grazing pastures.

Such concerns were soon dismissed from Rattan Chand's mind, however, for today was a special day. He had already washed, shaved and trimmed his ample moustache to perfection, and had swapped his *chola* for a raw wool jacket while a garish, heavily embroidered cap covered his thick greying hair. Consulting his wristwatch, he seemed keen to get going. He and his nephew were on their way to attend a small festival being held at the Durra temple at Batal.

'How long will you be away?' I asked.

'Just a night,' Rattan Chand replied. 'Last week our flock were attacked by wolves, so I am taking no chances.'

In the early evening I ascended a ridge about 200 metres above the lake. For a while the sun failed to penetrate the ominous dark clouds. Only an occasional shaft of sunlight enlivened the landscape. The sunlight settled momentarily on the silver rivulets of the Chandra River before touching the snowy peaks of the Mulkilla Range on the far side of the valley. Suddenly the sun burst onto our camp on a grassy strip on the northern shoreline of the lake. Our tents glowed in the low angle of the sun while a gentle breeze sent ripples across the surface of the lake.

My contentment was short lived. A group of six trekkers marched along the shoreline towards our camp. They had left Batal at lunchtime intent on spending a night at Chandra Tal. Israelis in their early twenties, they belonged to a different breed of backpacker and one I had little time for. Acknowledging my wave, they camped right beside us. In no time the music from their sound system destroyed any semblance of serenity. The music continued at a not-so-soft volume until the early hours of the morning. I lay awake and I was not amused!

Packing up the following morning, my fellow trekkers deposited their neatly wrapped plastic bags into a nearby pit. It appeared to be beyond their capabilities to burn them. Shortly after their departure, two shepherd dogs foraged in the garbage, dragging most of the contents across the meadow. This was too much for Norboo, Dilip and me. We launched 'Operation Clean-up'. Rolling up our sleeves we gathered an assortment of discarded tin cans, plastic bottles and everything else that should not have been there. Satisfied with our efforts, we dug a deep pit, covered the refuse with dry horse manure and added a little kerosene. Then we stood back and set it alight. In less than an hour the job was done, at least until the next inconsiderate group visited the lake.

Between Chandra Tal and the Bara Lacha La are two side rivers— the Tokpo Yongma (the lower river) and the Tokpo Gongma (the upper river). At this time of the year the snowmelt on the glaciers dramatically increased the river levels. Crossings were only possible in the early mornings before the sun melted the snows. Adjusting our schedule accordingly, we decided to camp alongside these torrents in order to maximise our chances of crossing safely the next day.

It took until early afternoon to complete the walk to the banks of the Tokpo Yongma. As soon as the mules were offloaded Biro and I were off on a recce. The swift flowing torrent looked almost impossible to cross. Even Biro shook his head in disbelief. It appeared hopeless. It seemed there was nowhere to ford the chocolate-brown swirling current. By late evening the water level had dropped marginally but that did not ease my concern as to how we would go the following morning.

'Good morning, good water.' It was 5am as Norboo greeted me with the words I wanted to hear. Overnight the river level had dropped dramatically. By the time we crossed, the water level was barely above our knees. We set a fast pace and in a few hours reached the Tokpo Gongma. It was just past 10am. By rights we should have waited until the next morning for the river level to drop, but we were impatient and decided to continue. Norboo and I tested the current: it was deep and swift but fordable. As I reached the centre of the river, the water rose to my crutch. I braced myself and cursed as the icy current raised my vocal cords by an octave or two. 'Why don't the Gaddi build bloody bridges!' I complained, as Norboo and I locked arms and pushed towards the far bank. Signalling for Biro, Dilip and the mules to follow, I shook myself like a drenched dog until some warmth returned to my extremities.

In the struggle to reach the far bank I failed to notice a shepherd on the ridge above our crossing point. At first he did not move, just observed us with interest. He then waved and pointed us in the direction of a campsite. Only when we had pitched our tents did he saunter down with a welcome supply of fresh goat's milk.

Proshutun Ram worked for another Gaddi who owned the flock. He was pleased to have a diversion in his day. After lunch we headed up to his dry-stone shelter covered with a bright-yellow plastic sheet. By the time Norboo and I arrived Biro had already made himself at home, sprawled out on thick blankets laid out on the ground. Casting my eye around the recesses of the hut, I noticed there were few concessions to luxury. Small calico bags of rice and maize flour were stacked in one corner together with an assortment of cooking pots and containers and a flat iron pan to cook *chapattis*. A kerosene stove was placed to one side of the hearth together with a handful of juniper twigs. There was also a tin of cooking oil, a packet of tea, a small quantity of *gur*—unrefined sugar—and a plastic container of milk. A few strands of dried meat hung on a birch branch above the hearth while in a corner I noticed a discarded whisky bottle, half full of *arak*. Before leaving, Dilip gave our new friend some carrots, potatoes and onions to supplement his daily meal of maize *chapatis* and goat's milk.

Late that afternoon a huge flock of sheep and goats appeared on a distant ridge. A lone shepherd accompanied by his two faithful dogs made his way down towards our camp. It was the 'master' returning. Kunju Ram was in his early forties, an impressive figure with his tall frame wrapped in a *chola* and holding a sturdy walking stick by his side. He stood as if he were posing for a *Country Life* magazine. We later discovered that he had 370 sheep and goats and was a respected elder among the local Gaddi.

After settling the flock, the Gaddi made themselves at home in our mess tent. Before long, talk turned to home. Proshutun Ram was unmarried while Kunju Ram had not seen his family for many months since leaving the Kangra Valley. 'My daughter is married [into another Gaddi family], my son has a government job,' he told us. Although considered wealthy Kunju was concerned about the future. 'Who will look after my flock when I am old?' This was a concern for many of the Gaddi, but what could they do? If shepherding was their *dharma* then to abandon Shivji's wishes would eventually result in misfortune.

Retiring early I heard the sound of voices from 'Dilip's *dhaba*'. Every so often I recognised Biro's voice as he forged new friendships. Biro was keen as always to discover as much as he could about his new friends. I was later informed that the Gaddi had also enquired enthusiastically about the nature of our journey. 'What kind of sheep and goats are bred in Ladakh?' they had asked. The bottle of *arak* was passed around as the muted voices continued well into the night. Slipping into a sound sleep I later woke as the shepherd dogs growled at the new moon.

It would be easy to romanticise the Gaddi life. On the face of it they seem to enjoy a stress-free existence for most of the year. Yet uncertainties are always present. The shepherds are only too aware that a pack of marauding wolves could destroy their entire flock or that a thunderstorm storm could wipe out the season's lambs.

In a month Proshutun Ram and Kunju Ram would prepare for their journey back to the Kangra Valley. By then they would have met up with their fellow shepherds from Chandra Tal and others who grazed their flocks on the far side of the Bara Lacha La. During the short season they would have seldom had an opportunity to get together and it would only be during their autumn migration that they would have the opportunity to relate their fortunes and experiences.

By the time the Gaddi reached the Kangra Valley in October I should be in Kashmir. In the interim I still had many high passes ahead of me. By my calculations my next pass, the Bara Lacha La, would be the halfway point on my trek. This was in fact a double pass. To the south it formed the divide between the upper reaches of the Chandra and Bhaga rivers; to the north it divided the Chandra and Bhaga headwaters with a source of the Tsarap River that flowed through the Zaskar and eventually into the Indus.

From the Gaddi camp it was a long, steady haul to the Bara Lacha La—a pass that is under snow for eight months of the year. It is only in July that hardy wildflowers add a patch of colour to the otherwise grey, barren fields of shale and scree stretching towards the pass. On this overcast day the low cloud merged with the undulating landscape. Striding ahead I came within a whisker of a family of Himalayan snow cocks that scrambled, hopped and took off in a flurry. An hour after leaving camp I recognised a row of a dilapidated rock cairns that defined the southern summit of the pass. This was not the kind of pass on which to exchange hugs or handshakes. Neither was today the time to make exhilarating comments on the view. I shivered in the near sub-zero temperatures as I waited for Norboo, Dilip and Biro. Once gathered we formed a solemn procession, walking in single file for the next 2 kilometres to the true summit of the Bara Lacha La (4950 metres) on the Manali to Leh road.

Well before I reached the northern pass I heard a convoy of trucks shunting and shuddering their way up the road. It was a sound that I had not heard since leaving Manali. The trucks would have left the Kullu Valley the previous day, negotiating the switchbacks over the Rhotang Pass, the motorable road linking Manali and Lahaul, before setting off at the crack of dawn on the long and gradual ascent to the Bara Lacha La. Once over the pass the trucks would cross the vast Lingti Plains to the border between Himachal Pradesh and the state of Jammu, Kashmir and Ladakh. After clearing border formalities the trucks would then need to cross two more passes if they were to reach the Indus Valley and Leh, the capital of Ladakh, by nightfall.

Reaching the road, our mules were unnerved by the sound of the traffic. I instinctively grabbed hold of one of the mule's reins as its load almost brushed the side of a passing truck. Fortunately it was only a few kilometres before we left the highway to a camp known as Kilang Sarai on the northern perimeter of the Lingti Plains.

The next morning I set out across the vast Lingti Plains. Locked in my own thoughts I was at first startled by the blast of truck horns. About a kilometre away several hundred sheep and goats were blocking the road to Leh. Judging by the blasts on the horns, the truck driver's

patience was reaching its limit, but any sense of urgency was lost on the shepherds. It was only after another three or four trucks had come to a halt that the flock began to scatter off the road. I heard the distinctive sound of raised voices before the truck convoy moved on. The drivers did not seem to comprehend that the Gaddi had been grazing their flocks on these high pastures long before the road was constructed.

Historically, the Lingti Plains were an important staging post for merchants and shepherds making their way to and from Ladakh. It would have been a colourful spectacle as hundreds of laden mules and sheep were unloaded before crossing Bara Lacha La. A day later they would have reached Patseo Serai in the upper Bhaga Valley to attend the annual autumn fair. The Changpa, the nomadic herders from the Tibetan borders, would have been well represented, as well as villagers from Lahaul and the Zaskar. The traders would have been in their element. Sacks of salt and wool, colourful cloths and exotic spices, barley and wheat, tobacco, sugar and ghee would have found their way either from the Zaskar or from the markets of the Kullu Valley. The Gaddi would have also made their presence felt, bartering their wool for all number of purchases before embarking on their autumn migration.

Nowadays camps of a different kind are pitched alongside the road. These large white tents accommodate Indian and foreign tourists on their two-day drive from Manali to Leh. Most tourists leave early the following morning in order to reach Leh by nightfall. It is hard to comprehend the change. Before the road was constructed in 1962 the only way to reach Leh from the Kullu Valley was on foot or horseback. It would have taken a week or more to complete the journey.

By comparison I had the best part of a month ahead of me to reach Leh. I did not intend to follow the road. In the next few days I would cross the less frequented Phitse La into the Zaskar region of Ladakh. I would then have three exhilarating weeks ahead of me to traverse the high passes to the outlying villages and monasteries of Leh and the Indus Valley.

## **CHAPTER 10**

### **Wandering Zanskar**

My first view of Zanskar was from a rocky plateau some 500 metres above the Kargyak Valley. I sat alone peering down on the first villages I had seen since leaving the Kullu Valley two weeks ago. But now the landscape had totally changed. Gone were the forested slopes, the flower-covered meadows and verdant valleys. In its place was a harsh, windswept terrain that swept down 1000 metres from an unbroken chain of jagged peaks and unseen snowfields to the valley floor. At first glance it was difficult to see how anyone could eke out a living, and it was only in the depths of the valleys that oases of ripening barley and wheat fields thrived amid tiny-whitewashed settlements. This was a medieval land of gods, demons and witches where traditional lifestyles had changed little over the centuries.

Zanskar constitutes the southern region of Ladakh. To reach it we had followed a backdoor route over the Phitse La (5450 metres) that would see us in Padum, the capital of Zanskar in a week. By my calculations it would then take no more than three weeks to reach the Indus Valley and Leh.

As I stood on the pass I was more than satisfied with my efforts. I had never felt stronger. Apart from the rustle of the wind passing through the prayer flags there was a complete absence of sound. I took in the ridges immediately above the pass rising to impressive snow banks while in the distance I saw the barren folds of the Zanskar Range stretching towards the eastern horizon. Lost in my thoughts I failed at first to hear the faint sound of mule bells signalling that Biro and his team were not too far behind.

*'Julay, Julay.'* As Norboo and Dilip reached the top of the pass we exchanged the universal Ladakhi greeting for both 'hello' and 'goodbye'. It was a greeting we would repeat innumerable times on our wanderings over the next two months.

Biro was, as always, anxious to get going. It would take us most of the morning to reach camp, descending a steep snowfield before following an ill-defined trail to a tiny clearing. It would also be the last time we would camp by ourselves for a week or so.

A further 500-metre descent the next day to the valley floor brought us close to Kargyak village. I selected a campsite with care for we were now on one of the most popular trekking routes in Ladakh. Each season, about 5000 trekkers follow an established trail from Darcha village in Lahaul before crossing the Himalayan Range via the Shingo La (4980 metres). From the pass it takes a week to reach the administrative headquarters of the Zanskar region at Padum. Since 1974 Zanskar has been high on the wish list of trekkers keen to discover an isolated Buddhist kingdom culturally similar to Tibet, and for most it would surpass their expectations. It had always surpassed mine and over the last twenty-five years I had regularly crossed the main passes into and out of the region.

For the early British explorers the region was off the map. In 1849 Alexander Cunningham—a member of the British Ground Survey Commission—compiled a list of the main trails linking Ladakh with Baltistan, Kashmir and the rest of the West Himalaya regions. Yet the routes through Zanskar are only mentioned in the briefest of detail. Even though Cunningham's fellow member on the commission Thomas Thomson had trekked to Padum en route to Leh and the Karakoram Pass in 1848, it would be many years before the authorities in Calcutta appreciated the true extent of this isolated Himalayan kingdom. Meanwhile, what the British discovered in the nineteenth century had been known to Buddhist pilgrims for over a thousand years.

My Ladakhi guide, Norboo Tsering, was a picture of good health. Dressed in his trekking gear with his blue fleece jacket, light brown walking pants and sturdy boots he looked every inch a mountain guide. For him the distinction between Zanskar and Ladakh was academic. They shared a common language and culture and, as far as he was concerned, he was back in his homeland. Norboo was from Khalse in the lower Indus Valley. One of ten children (eight boys and two girls), he was the only one involved in tourism. After completing his secondary education he had studied for an Arts degree at Chandigarh in the Punjab before embarking on his chosen vocation. For seven years he had worked as a guide before joining World Expeditions (India), which already employed a strong Ladakhi contingent. Following a brief stint in Delhi, Norboo had been transferred back to Leh where he led trekking groups throughout the season. After this trek he would travel to Kathmandu to attend an intensive medical course so each



afternoon he could be seen in the inner recess of his tent thumbing through his first-aid handbook. He had recently married a teacher from Wanlah, not far from the famous monastery of Lamayuru and this had undoubtedly placed a new pressure on his chosen career. In the next few weeks I would put his knowledge of 'all things Ladakhi' to the test, including local cuisine and beverages.

Test number one came on our first evening at Kargyak. I made a simple request for Norboo and Biro to get some chang—the local barley beer, low in alcoholic content, that is drunk by villagers more as refreshment than as a means of getting intoxicated—when they wandered back to the village. It was not to be.

'Sorry, no *chang* available,' was the sombre reply. But then Norboo perked up, 'But we got turnips.'

Not wishing to sound disappointed with their efforts, I asked why there was a sudden need for turnips.

'Because it makes good *thukpa*.'

I should have guessed. We had already sampled the traditional Ladakhi dish en route to the Phitse La but now things were different. Tonight Biro was to be the 'celebrity chef' and Dilip was demoted to head bottlewasher for the night. For all those keen to have the recipe, it is set out below.

#### *Biro Negi's Turnip Thukpa*

- 1. Heat a large saucepan of water. When it boils add a handful of shredded cucumber (although there is no chance of ever tasting the cucumber).*
- 2. Add a good helping of chopped meat (in this case dried mutton that Biro had purchased from the Gaddi a week ago on the Bara Lacha La).*
- 3. Add salt, coriander, a liberal sprinkling of red chilli powder, mixed masala, turmeric, black pepper, plus fresh garlic and green chilli and boil for twenty minutes.*
- 4. Chop the turnip and cook in a pressure cooker (if time is not at a premium you could simply add the turnip to the rest of the broth and boil until cooked).*
- 5. Add cooked turnip plus a sprinkling of flour to the saucepan to thicken the broth.*
- 6. Add noodles (in this case torn-up slices of flour mixed with water, as you would do when making chapatti) and boil for five to ten minutes. Simmer for a further 30 minutes and it is ready to serve.*

Served with a few extra chillies, it certainly hit the right spot on a cool Kargyak evening. Indeed it was to become the mainstay of our evening meals throughout Ladakh.

Rising early the next day, I walked up the trail to the village. The lingering smell of yak dung fires pervaded the air. I heard the 'chuk, chuk' of the chukhar partridge scurrying up a scree slope and the horned lark calling from a distant meadow before the air was punctuated by the pitiful braying of a donkey calling its mate. When the braying ended a young boy, no older than seven or eight, whistled as he led a flock of sheep and angora goats to graze high above the valley.

Several women were already at work in the meadows. Stopping every few paces they stooped and tossed yak dung into the cane baskets on their backs. By 8am they would have returned to the village. After a breakfast of *tsampa* and butter tea they then worked in their gardens growing turnips and other root vegetables or tended to the irrigation channels. Sometimes this might involve a trek several kilometres from the village to maintain the channels that drew the waters from glacier-fed streams. Closer to the village, the channels were routinely opened and closed to ensure that each family's crops received a fair share of water.

While the women took charge of the family home, the men spent most of the summer months minding the herds of yaks and *zhos* a day or two beyond the village. Later in the season they would take their mules to Darcha or Padum to purchase supplies of cooking oil, kerosene and other household necessities. In an essentially barter economy the opportunity to earn a little cash was not to be missed. Some of the villagers had built extensions to their homes to accommodate trekkers, although others were more wary of making what they considered to be a marginal investment.

At first the villagers had been astonished when in the mid-1970s the first group of trekkers

dressed in brightly coloured outdoor gear and oversized trekking boots arrived at Kargyak. Since then a new generation of villagers had come to grips with recreational travel although they were still bemused as to why so many Westerners flew halfway round the world to visit them. For the villagers there was no concept of exercise for pleasure or fitness. For them, exercise meant work.

It therefore came as no surprise that the villagers were keen to know how long it would take the road to reach Kargyak. After years of delays the road now extended well beyond Padum, and if all went to plan it would take only a few more seasons to reach the village. An old trekking dilemma would then need to be resolved. While trekkers want to visit remote villages, remote villages want roads. It has always been my contention that trekking in the Himalaya will, within a generation or two, be no different from in Australia or America: confined to vast wilderness regions or national parks.

Yet, whatever the outcome for the Ladakhi villager in this corner of Zaskar, the road would only be open for a few months of the year. For the rest of the time landslides and heavy snowfalls would ensure the villagers remained in relative isolation and would continue to use their boots and pack animals as they had done for countless generations.

In the late afternoon I ascended a ridge above our camp. To the south, the trail wound across a 10-kilometre plain to the base of a huge 6000-metre rock monolith known as Gumburanjun. This peak is almost entirely composed of white granite. On a geological timeframe it is very young—just 22 million years old—part of the recent formation of the Himalaya. For geologists this remote corner provides a fine example of the snow-capped peaks of the Himalaya (the Crystalline Himalaya) contrasting with the multi-coloured sediments of the Zaskar Range (the Tethyan Himalaya). Their observations are enhanced by the wealth of fossils deposited when this region of the Himalaya was still part of the seabed.

I watched the huge face of Gumburanjun glistening in the late afternoon sun. Despite the majestic scale, I could have been in the Atlas Mountains of Morocco or in the Chilean *altiplano*. It was only the tiny Buddhist *chorten* on the side of the trail across the plateau that reminded me I was in the Himalaya.

The next day we were up and ready to hit the trail before most of my fellow trekkers had unzipped their tents. While Dilip packed his kitchen gear into the tin trunks Biro loaded his mules. We were anxious to reach our next camp at Purne before the heat of the day, with an anticipated temperature in the high twenties, took its toll.

‘At least there will be shade,’ Norboo reminded me, for after two weeks trekking through terrain devoid of trees we would at last be able to rest under a poplar or willow grove. As elsewhere in Ladakh, the poplar was grown primarily for construction while the willow was put to a variety of uses, including fuel, baskets or as an attractive decorative edging on the roofs of houses. There were no fruit trees in the valley; Ladakh’s famous apricot orchards were located closer to the Indus Valley where the climate and elevation were more suitable.

Rows of *mani* walls—dry-stone walls in-filled with sand and rock and topped with slate and stones engraved with Buddhist symbols and prayers—lined the trail. At the end of each *mani* wall was a *chorten* built on five levels that supported a conical dome. Although the *chorten* was originally a repository for the ashes of an important Buddhist monk, most village *chortens* serve primarily as a reminder of the five elements of the cosmos, each level representing earth, wind, fire, water and ether. There is a modern tendency in Zaskar to paint a row of *chortens* in different colours. In addition to the traditional whitewashed chortens, others are painted either black or yellow. The white *chorten* represents knowledge, the yellow wisdom, while black represents the protector. According to tradition each *chorten* is given a fresh coat of paint after an important festival or to commemorate the death of an important villager.

The village of Tetha is situated about midway between Kargyak and Purne. From a distance the village set amid the ripening fields provided an impression of natural harmony in this otherwise stark almost confronting mountainscape. The dozen whitewashed houses were built in close proximity to each other to provide protection from the elements in winter as well as a modicum of shade in the short summer months. The rooms on the upper level of the dwellings were set out to maximise access to the sun. The living rooms, often with three-quarter length windows, were located at the south-east corner to make the long winter months more bearable. The flat roofs were insulated with stacks of hay as well as a string of colourful prayer flags—a reminder of the region’s abiding Buddhist heritage, even though the flags competed with the solar panels that had become increasingly common in the remote villages of Zaskar and Ladakh.

‘*Lhamo khyong, Lhamo khyong, Yale khyong, Lhamo le.*’ The melodic chant resounded across the fields just beyond Tetha. Broadly translated as, ‘Take it easy, easy does it,’ it accompanied the villagers as they thinned and weeded the ripening crops of barley, wheat and peas in

preparation for the harvest. Working in the fields was a social occasion with time for occasionally breaking into a gentle chorus, reflecting a belief that if you sing you never get tired.

The infants were placed in wicker baskets, wide-eyed mini-adults, with rosy cheeks and runny noses. Their heads were covered with brightly covered bonnets on which amulets were pinned to ward off evil spirits. Children were kept in close attendance but, discovering a stranger in their midst, they abandoned their duties and headed towards me, chanting, 'Give me one pen. Give me one bon bon!' I shook my head and warded off the persistent little fingers attempting to loosen the buckles of my rucksack. That set off a game. It seemed that what was on these little minds was, 'Let's see how many times we can get away with tugging the foreigner's rucksack!' At first I was not amused; then I realised that the joke was on me. Pretending to be angry, I raised my arms in the air and chased my tormentors. Squeals of laughter erupted, alerting the adults to the diversion. They watched as the children ran in all directions pursued by a white-bearded, red-faced trekker who appeared to have been out in the sun too long. In the end I collapsed on a grassy bank while the little imps reassembled, mightily pleased with their efforts.

By midday Norboo and I had made our way to the three houses that constituted the settlement of Purne. The temperatures had risen into the thirties and my shirt was coated in sweat so I went off in search of shade. Pouring ice-cold water from an irrigation channel over my head I rested under the gentle sway of poplar trees. With my head propped on the side of my rucksack, I fell sound asleep. An hour later I rubbed my eyes and discovered that Norboo and Dilip had set up camp in a nearby field. All I needed to do was unpack my kitbag and laze on my sleeping bag. I was aware that the following morning's trek would not be a big one. It was only a good hour's hike up a narrow gorge to the ancient monastery of Phugtal.

Nothing can quite prepare you for your first view of Phugtal monastery. I turned a bend in the path and the monastery appeared, seemingly suspended on a sheer cliff face. The imposing Assembly Hall was carved out of a huge limestone cave below which were monks' quarters perched on a series of rock ledges that dropped almost vertically for 100 metres or more to the turbulent waters of the Tsarap River.

The origins of the site can be traced to a cave deep in the cliff face, which would have been used by the earliest Buddhist monks as a place of shelter and meditation long before the monastery was established. According to the local legends it was one of the celebrated sites selected by the noted scholar Ring Chen Brang po, who is said to have founded 108 monasteries in Ladakh and West Tibet in the tenth century. At first the low cloud filtering the sunlight precluded any sunlit image of the monastery. I waited patiently, glancing upwards every so often for a break in the clouds until, without warning, the sun broke through. Initially, it settled on a lone cedar tree on the cliff top above the monastery before sweeping across the face of the monastery itself. The whitewashed walls of the Assembly Hall glistened, the whiteness accentuated by the adjacent cliffs still in deep shadow.

A red-robed monk of Friar Tuck proportions led two laden mules beside a *mani* wall. He rubbed the beads of his rosary with one hand while holding the reins of the mules in the other. Beneath his robes I spied a pair of trekking boots that had seen many a Himalayan kilometre. As he drew towards me I offered him an apple. At first he was taken aback, but then held out his hand. He examined the apple for a moment as if he had never seen one before in his life. Next he rubbed it hard on his sleeve before bursting out in a deep belly laugh and continuing down the trail to Purne. Why he was so amused I did not know. He would have been used to foreign tourists visiting his monastery and I was sure I would not have been the first to offer him an apple! Perhaps he thought the apple was payment in lieu of paying the standard monastery entrance fee of Rs100 (US\$2) used to assist with the upkeep of the monastery and the welfare of the monks. Even now the result of my small act of kindness remains one of life's little mysteries.

Reaching the entrance to the monastery, Norboo and I ascended a series of irregular stone steps and entered a darkened passageway leading to the Assembly Hall. A couple of novice monks scurried by, late for the morning's lessons about to be conducted in the sheltered courtyard. A small bronze plaque caught my eye. It was affixed to a wall just outside the limestone cave and commemorated the life of Cosmos de Koros. The Hungarian scholar had studied at Phugtal monastery from 1825 to 1827 and was credited as the first European to visit the Zanskar region. He eventually abandoned his quest to trace the origins of his native language in order to compile the first European translation of the Tibetan language.

Like most monasteries in Ladakh, Phugtal is more than a centre of religious learning. Its monks officiate in the villages at times of birth, death and marriage. The monastery also provides schooling for pupils with a religious vocation as well as those in need of a more general education. Attendance at prayers and Buddhist studies is compulsory. There are also Ladakhi, Hindi and English classes as well as mathematics and general studies.

Artists are also encouraged to realise their potential. As in all monasteries in the western Himalaya, the exquisite wall paintings—the mandalas—fulfill a crucial role in depicting Buddhist iconography. It takes a lifetime to perfect the drawings. A master painter first composes the mandala with fine strokes of charcoal. It is then the turn of the assistant to colour it. Natural pigments add an unmistakable character. The vermilion—the red pigment (*tsal*)—comes typically from the Nubra Valley to the north of Leh. Yellow (*gserpa*) comes from Norboo's village of Khalse, brown (*mugpa*) from the Markha Valley south of Leh and green (*jungkhu*) from the copper oxidation common throughout Ladakh.

Although Phugtal boasts of accommodating around eighty monks, only a handful were present at the time of my visit. Many were away attending the festivals at the monasteries at Padum and Sani. The rest were easy to pick out, their deep red tunics adding flashes of colour as they darted across the opposite hillside, gathering bundles of juniper to be burnt during a forthcoming ceremony.

About thirty students were enrolled at the monastery. Most came from villages within a day's walk of Phugtal. Tenzing was an eight-year-old from the village of Kye close to Kargyak. In spite of his youthful grin, Tenzing had the look of one wise beyond his years. As soon as we entered the courtyard he took charge of us. Befriending Norboo and I, he informed us that he was one of five brothers and sisters and that one of his brothers attended a monastic school at Reru, a further stage down the valley. For Tenzing the school lessons lasted from 10am to 4pm. The mornings were set aside for general education and languages while the afternoons were reserved for religious studies and prayers. Outside of these hours he worked in the kitchen earning his keep or playing his favourite game, soccer—a not so unlikely sport for anyone who has seen the delightful movie *The Cup*, based on a group of novice monks who wanted to watch the 1998 World Cup final. As in any boarding school, rules were many. The bridge over the Tsarap River, a kilometre down the valley, was the limit of Tenzing's wandering during the week, although special permission could be given by one of the senior monks for a Sunday outing to Purne. Of course, for the day students living in Phugtal village 4pm was the time to scramble down the hillside and head for home across the valley.

When Tenzing turned fifteen, he would decide whether to return to his family or embark on further studies to be a monk. If he aspired to be a monk he would be required to study for a minimum of five or six years after which he might go on to study at Choglamsar near Leh or even to go to Varanasi before graduating as a *geshe* or teacher. On his return to Phugtal, Tenzing would assume the duties of a full-time monk, overseeing one of the village monasteries near to his home where he would remain for a minimum of three years. Even at that time it would not be too late for Tenzing to change his mind. Should he renounce his vows he would be free to marry and start a family without any stigma. At the moment, however, these years were too far away for Tenzing to contemplate. He was, he assured us, content with his monastic life although he admitted that, like any boarder of a tender age, he sometimes missed his family.

As we whiled away our time in the courtyard an elderly monk confirmed to Norboo that the *Ringboche*—an incarnate lama and also the brother of His Holiness the Fourteenth Dalai Lama—presided over Phugtal and many of the other monasteries in Zaskar. Nowadays he lived in Dharamsala where his commitments had precluded him visiting Phugtal for many years. In the interim a senior monk oversaw the day-to-day administration of the monastery. He also oversaw the practice of yangtang, the traditional means of land ownership. At Phugtal, the monastery owns a considerable amount of the surrounding land as well as in some of the nearby villages. In return for the use of the land the villagers agree to donate an agreed percentage of the harvest to the monastery. While the tradition is prevalent in many of the villagers through Zaskar and Ladakh, it is slowly being superseded as more and more Ladakhi villagers aspire to own their land. Norboo was keen to point out that his family owned their land although they still voluntarily donated a percentage of their apricot harvest to their affiliate monastery at Lamayuru each season.

For the rest of the morning Tenzing and his friends peppered Norboo with questions.

'What do you do?'

'How much do you earn?'

'Do you have a family?'

'What is it like to live in Delhi?'

And, above all, 'Who is that strange character with the white beard making notes in solitude?'

'Do they know where America is?' I asked Norboo. He posed the question to Tenzing and his friends who chattered and speculated among themselves.

'They say they have heard about it, but they are not sure where it is,' Norboo replied.

My question was not without reason. I had not been far from Phugtal when I had learned of the tragic turn of events on 11 September 2001. At that time I had been accompanying a group that included three American trekkers. On 11 September we had camped close to Kargyak, and although rumours had soon circulated that something was seriously amiss, it had not been until four days later that I was able to listen to a radio. The radio had intermittently crackled to life as I tried to tune into the BBC World News coverage that included a graphic description of the collapse of the Twin Towers in New York. Trying hard to grasp the magnitude of the disaster, I had taken the eldest American to one side—a wiry 67-year-old from California—and had given him a choice. 'If you want to get back home as soon as possible I will arrange for you to do so.'

It had taken my trekking companion only a moment to consider his reply. 'Thanks Garry, but Zanskar is probably the safest place in the world right now.'

The day after my visit to Phugtal we set off from Purne. After a few hours we met up with a group of Ladakhi teenagers who were taking a rest on the side of the trail. They were in high spirits. The young women, dressed in long dark woollen robes tied at the waist with a colourful cord, sat on one side of the trail, while the young men, dressed in cotton shirts, jeans and trainers, sat on the other. Not a word was spoken between the two groups. Only an occasional glance thrown in each direction gave a hint of what was on their minds. They were all excited at the prospect of attending the upcoming annual Sani festival and having a few days away from the watchful eye of their parents. Padum was the 'big city' and the festival at the nearby monastery at Sani was an opportunity to rekindle friendships and perhaps make a few new ones.

To reach Sani in two days' time to attend the festival would necessitate reviewing our schedule. I had never attended a festival in Zanskar—most are held in the winter—so this was one I didn't want to miss. After conferring with Norboo, I decided to press ahead and double-stage to Padum. In so doing, we would have just enough time to reach Sani for the second day of the famous masked dances. It would prove a fascinating diversion before we continued on our trek that would next take us over a series of high passes leading to the Indus Valley.

## **CHAPTER 11**

### **Beyond the High Passes**

For centuries the high mountain passes enclosing Zaskar posed a formidable challenge to invaders. Most passes are under deep snow for at least eight months of the year, a fact not lost on the Moghul, Gurkha or Sikh armies intent on making their mark across the West Himalaya. The passes also acted as a deterrent to travellers, and even today tax the resolve of the most intrepid trekkers. It was not until 1848 that Thomas Thomson crossed the snow-bound Umasi La, immediately to the south of Padum, to become the first British explorer to reach this remote Himalayan kingdom.

The Umasi La would have been waist deep in snow as Thomson ploughed his way up the last few hundred metres on 22 June 1848. On the pass he boiled water in order to calculate that its height was around 18,000 feet (5490 metres), about 150 metres higher than the present-day calculation. For Thomson this was his first serious pass crossing on an expedition that would eventually take him to the Karakoram Pass—the gateway to Central Asia.

Thomson was one of three members of the Boundary Commission set up by the British authorities to improve their knowledge of the vast borders of Ladakh. In today's terms it would have been a 'fact-finding mission' for, along with team members Alexander Cunningham and Henry Stratchey, Thomson was intent on discovering everything there was to know about this remote outpost in the Himalaya. There was also a vital need for intelligence to determine whether there was any unknown pass to the north of Ladakh that the Russian forces could follow if they decided to invade British India. The team took their orders seriously and literally did not leave a rock unturned as far as the geography, culture or flora and fauna of Zaskar and Ladakh went.

The timing of his expedition would not have been lost on Thomson. Two years previously, in 1846, Gulab Singh had become the First Maharajah of Jammu and Kashmir (and that included Ladakh), establishing a princely kingdom the borders of which are still a source of dispute between India and Pakistan. Gulab Singh—at the time the Raja of Jammu—had long dreamed of establishing a vast Himalayan empire. To realise his ambitions he depended on the unwavering support of a trusted general, Zorawar Singh. In September 1834 Zorawar Singh secured a presence in Ladakh. A year later, after a local uprising, he was forced to return, and after token resistance the King of Ladakh was defeated and exiled to the present-day palace at Stok.

After several successful forays in Ladakh and Zaskar, Zorawar Singh returned to his base in Kishtwar. In October 1839 he received news that an outpost of troops in Padum had been killed in an uprising. The general assembled his army and prepared for battle. It was already late in the season and the first time an army of this size had attempted to cross the Umasi La. By now the pass was under deep snow and the night-time temperatures fell well below freezing. The elements took their toll. Crossing the pass, twenty of the troops died from the cold while many others lost their fingers and toes to frostbite. Within a week Zorawar Singh exacted his revenge. The King of Padum (the ruler of upper Zaskar) was killed, while the King of Zangla (the ruler of lower Zaskar) was forced into submission. An accord was reached and the King of Zangla was able to retain sovereignty over what must be one of the smallest kingdoms in the Himalaya.

Yet Zorawar Singh's days were numbered. After conquering Baltistan he set his sights on Tibet. On 12 December 1841 his army was defeated by a combination of Tibetan ingenuity and severe cold. Zorawar Singh was killed in combat and only a handful of his troops were able to make it back to Jammu. It was not until five years later that a combination of British endeavour and the decline of Sikh rule in Kashmir permitted Gulab Singh to realise his lifelong dream of ruling his vast and varied Himalayan kingdom.

Like Zorawar Singh, Thomson had little positive to say about Padum. 'It is much decayed,' was how he described it, although he does not go into detail. Today it is the administrative centre of the Zaskar region; a sprawling mixture of houses, shops and government buildings set on a broad plateau a few kilometres above the confluence of the Tsarap and Lunak rivers. In 1981 it was connected by road to Kargil, Kashmir and Leh. Since then, as soon as the road is cleared of snow, Padum braces itself for an influx of tourists, trekkers and a sizeable contingent of traders from Kargil and Kashmir. There is an unobtrusive Buddhist monastery just above the main bazaar and also a mosque. Completed in 1998 it is attended by the small community of Muslims who settled in Padum in the mid-nineteenth century not long after Zorawar Singh had led his

troops into the region.

Completing the last tiring stage along the dirt road leading into Padum, Norboo, Dilip and I headed straight to the Tourist Bungalow. We were fortunate to have a good contact there whom we had known for years. With a stout frame and an abundant moustache, Shahid Yasim came from one of the established Muslim families in Padum. He was officially the resident cook at the Tourist Bungalow, although to all intents and purposes he ran the show. Even though accommodation was as scarce as hen's teeth Yasim somehow found us a room. He also fed us, appearing at regular intervals from his kitchen with steaming bowls of rice, dhal and vegetables.

Shahid Yasim was 'Mr Fixit'. He bargained on our behalf with the Kashmiri merchants; fixed our mess tent and had my boots repaired; located a cache of kerosene; and put out the word that we needed to buy fodder for our mules. He also kept an eye on our gear stored in a corner of the Tourist compound. Without Yasim we would not have had time to purchase our supplies and attend the second day of the Sani festival.

Sani is one of the oldest religious sites in Ladakh. Although some historians maintain that the ancient *chorten* to the west of the complex dates to the time of Kaniskha in the second century AD, it is generally accepted that the monastery was established during the tenth century. This was a time when Buddhist artists from Kashmir wandered to Ladakh and Zaskar in search of patronage. What is of particular interest to Buddhist scholars today is that Sani, together with Alchi monastery in the Indus Valley and Tabo monastery in Spiti, houses some of the few surviving examples of Indo-Buddhist wall painting (as opposed to Tibetan-Buddhist styles) in the western Himalaya.

The 9-kilometre trek from Padum to Sani could hardly have been described as exhilarating. Although he uttered not a word of disapproval, I was sure Norboo regretted his offer to walk with me. Every few minutes a jeep packed with villagers roared past us, sending up thick clouds of dust that had hardly settled before the next jeep drove by. Well before Norboo and I reached Sani we needed tea. Making a beeline to one of the half a dozen white marquees we gulped down several glasses of sweet milky tea and devoured a plate of freshly prepared samosas. Families sat on rugs on tiny patches of grass beside irrigation channels. Bowls of *tsampa*, ladles of yoghurt, freshly baked bread and juicy tomatoes were washed down with copious glasses of *chang* as they exchanged gossip to their hearts' content.

The festival was more like a medieval English fair than a solemn religious occasion. It was an opportunity for villagers to meet up as well as witness the masked dances due to take place that afternoon. I watched a steady stream of several hundred villagers circumambulate the monastery. Without varying their pace they turned the prayer wheels set in the outer stone walls. Their attention was divided between the quest to accumulate religious merit and the need to secure the bargains on sale at the makeshift stalls erected around the precincts of the monastery. Everyone it seemed had a little money to burn. On some stalls, cotton shirts and woollen clothing were piled high in a variety of colours, shapes and sizes. On other stalls dried apricots and chillies were packed into plastic bags to be sold by the kilo. Cooking utensils, assorted jewellery, towels and bedcovers were on sale at rock-bottom prices. The vendors were mostly wily Kashmiri who had transported the goods from Kashmir and Kargil just for the occasion. By far the busiest outlet was a tractor trailer from where boxes of apples, pears and bunches of bananas from the Indian plains sold like hotcakes.

The hours preceding the masked dances were not without drama. In the early afternoon the sky darkened and the upper branches of the ancient poplars outside the monastery swayed violently as winds rose to almost gale force. As everyone scurried for cover, excited voices implored friends to help secure the tent canopies. Plastic cups and boxes of provisions were upturned. Then, in a moment, the storm passed. As we dusted ourselves down, novice monks in the monastery courtyard blew into long horns to herald the start of the masked dances.

A wave of anticipation spread through the congregation. When at last the first performers entered the courtyard twirling and pirouetting to a fanfare of horns a handful of European tourists could no longer contain themselves. I watched in disbelief as an elderly Ladakhi man was pushed to oneside as they vied to gain the best vantage points and view the dances through their enormous camera lens.

The commencement of the *Cham*, or masked dances was marked by the rhythmic tone of horns (*dungchen*) and trumpets (*konglang*), together with a beating of drums (*nga*) and crashing of cymbals (*silnyen*) as the musicians gradually reached a crescendo. The first dance purified the ceremony, dismissing any demons that might have been lurking in the monastery. The dances then continued in honour of the life, times and teaching of Padmasambhava, otherwise known to his followers as the Guru Ringboche. Monks dressed in heavily embroidered gowns with yellow, red, green and purple tassels swirled and side-stepped around the main prayer flag. Each

significant step was met by a clash of symbols and the sound of horns played by the musicians seated on one side of the courtyard. After each dance there was silence. No one applauded. The dances were not to entertain but to illustrate the human condition and its relation to the divine.

The monks then prepared for the Dance of the Eight Manifestations of the Guru Ringboche. At an unseen signal they entered the courtyard dressed in colourful brocades while others wore terrifying masks to ward off evil spirits. The Guru Rimpoche made a dramatic entrance with his consorts. Standing to one side, he watched dances performed in honour of his teachings. At one point, young students dressed completely in white rang bells and beat small drums as they enacted their role as protectors of the cremation grounds. Later the monks took huge steps symbolising the power of the thunderbolt to suppress the demons and take possession of the earth.

By 4pm the ceremony was over. There was no grand finale; after the last dance the monks simply disappeared inside the monastery. Norboo and I joined the milling crowd waiting vainly for a jeep or exchanging farewells before undertaking the walk back to Padum.

According to my schedule it would only take a couple of hours the next day to complete the 8 kilometres across the broad Zaskar Valley to Karsha monastery. After a day at the monastery we would then head north alongside the swirling waters of the Zaskar River to the village of Pishu before crossing a wooden bridge over the river to Zangla, the capital of the lower kingdom of the Zaskar. From there, we would undertake a challenging traverse leading to the Indus Valley and Leh.

It is sometimes hard to grasp the sheer scale of the stark mountains enclosing the Zaskar Valley. Even the impressive Karsha monastery appears tiny, dwarfed by the fold upon fold of exposed rock that rises almost 2000 metres above the valley floor. These are no alpine peaks with perfectly formed snow-capped summits. This is the Trans-Himalaya—raw and confronting, stretching as far as the Tibetan plateau.

Only when you get closer to Karsha can you appreciate the true dimensions of the monastery. The ochre-painted Assembly Hall is perched on a rocky outcrop, perfectly positioned to catch the first rays of sunlight. The labyrinth of monks' quarters spread down to the valley floor, the whitewashed walls intensified against the backdrop of the nearby mountainside still deep in shadow.

The monastery dates back to the tenth century, to the time when Buddhism first gained a foothold in this remote corner of the Himalaya. Although the location of the monastery meant it would have attracted support from the earliest villagers, it was not until the fifteenth century that Karsha rose in prominence. By then it had secured the patronage of the emerging Gelugpa order (often referred to as the Yellow Hat sect) founded by the renowned sage Tsong Khapa whose teachings were to spread across Ladakh and Zaskar.

Well before dawn I heard faint rumblings deep within the confines of the monastery. Even though we had planned to camp at Karsha for two nights early morning was by far the best time to visit the monastery. As Norboo and I ascended to the Assembly Hall the prayers were underway. The sound of deep sonorous chanting, the intermittent clash of symbols and a crescendo of horns from within the Assembly Hall broke the still mountain air.

I walked to the far side of the cobblestone courtyard. Directly below me a young monk sat cross-legged in the sun quietly reciting his scriptures. He was unaware of my presence. I watched him for a minute or so before casting my eyes across the broad floodplain and the peaks beyond that would have provided inspiration for countless generations of monks.

Without warning, the chanting came to an abrupt halt. There was a short silence before about thirty red-robed monks swept into the courtyard. Embracing the sunlight, they formed small groups chattering among themselves and planning their day before slipping away to their living quarters in the lower flanks of the monastery.

Unnoticed, I slipped inside the Assembly Hall and adjusted my eyes to the dim light. For once I was alone. The lingering scent of juniper tempered the acrid smell of butter lamps (sunflower oil is now used instead of butter in most monasteries) wafting from the rows of small brass bowls and merged with the musty smell of woollen carpets. Directly in front of me were several rows of low wooden benches set on opposite sides of a carpeted aisle. Some were covered with heavy crimson robes; on others thick prayer books were open revealing a Tibetan transcript of the *sutra*, the teachings of the historical Buddha. Beyond the rows of benches at the far end of the hall was an elevated platform with cushioned seats placed on two levels. The higher level was reserved for His Holiness the Fourteenth Dalai Lama; the lower seat was for the *geshe*, the head teacher who led the prayers. Behind the raised platform was an inner recess. Lit by hundreds of butter lamps, an imposing statue of the Sakyamuni Buddha observed the mortal



world.

In the eerie silence a mouse scurried between the benches in search of morsels of food. Chuckling to myself, I was at first unaware that a novice monk had entered the hall. He beckoned me to follow him. Back in the courtyard, Norboo was in conversation with an elderly monk. I placed the palms of my hands together and bowed my head as a mark of respect. While the young monk hovered at my side, Norboo introduced me. 'Garry, this is Lobsang Khardup'.

If there are divine beings then I was looking at one. The *geshe* was a moon-faced monk with eyes that reflected a lifetime of learning. Norboo explained that we had been invited to join him for tea in his living quarters. It was a generous offer as he had already been teaching and leading the prayers since early morning.

Even before I had time to sit cross-legged in his room, Lobsang Khardup was well into his stride. 'I have had many offers to travel and teach in Europe but nowadays I have too much to do in Karsha.'

He was a distinguished teacher, having spent twenty-six years studying at the Tibetan Buddhist center in Karnataka in South India before returning to teach in Zanskar. He had also travelled and taught at monasteries in Mongolia.

Lobsang Khardup's quarters were spartan, even by monastic standards. Plywood partitions had recently been erected; his bed was covered with a Tibetan carpet and sat on a platform just above the ground; a simple hand-woven carpet was laid on the ground for his guests. Without ceremony, the *geshe* called for a young monk to serve butter tea from a large brass urn. I waited until the tea was poured before mixing a liberal helping of *tsampa* into my bowl and slurping the mixture down like a true Ladakhi.

Switching from Ladakhi to English, Norboo delighted in explaining something of my trek. Lobsang laughed at the mention of my pilgrimage. At that moment we were joined by another *geshe*, Lobsang Sangye, a jocular, monk, who oversaw the monastery's administration. Old friends, Lobsang Sangye had studied with Lobsang Khardup for many years in South India.

After an exchange of pleasantries Lobsang Khardup directed our attention to his concerns about the future of Karsha. 'Funding is high on the list of our priorities as the number of monks is declining each year. There are now just over a hundred, while we have only thirty-five student monks. Our most pressing concern is to complete our school,' as he pointed to a building just below the village, 'and to have proper boarding facilities so that novice monks who come from the outlying villages can stay and extend their education instead of being sent to Leh and Choglamsar.'

'At present, families in the Zanskar have lost the will to send their children to monasteries. They prefer government schools where they can hopefully finish and secure a job in government service or a well-paid job in Leh. Learning the Buddhist scriptures is no longer a need.'

'We give them clothing, three meals and an education,' chimed in Lobsang Sangye. But Lobsang Khardup continued, 'What we need above all is a good teacher and good training for the novice monks. We know this is something of our own making but we need a new generation of teachers to prepare our community for change.'

There was also the issue regarding the proposed road up the Zanskar gorge that would link the Zanskar directly with the Indus Valley and Leh for most of the year. It was a development not lost on Lobsang Khardup 'This will undoubtedly clash with traditional values, and for this we must be ready.'

It was a freewheeling conversation that lasted well over an hour. Our subjects ranged from my views on Christianity in economically developed countries; creating mandalas on computers; the upsurge in the popularity of Buddhism in the West (nods of encouragement all round); and the reasons that so many foreigners travelled to the Zanskar.

Although expressing concerns about the future, Lobsang Khardup's final comments were tinged with optimism. 'We hope that in spite of our present worries that we will have a healthy future. After all the monastery has been here for 950 years.'

As Norboo and I stood up to leave, Lobsang Sange handed me a folder outlining his plans. Few words were exchanged as Norboo and I returned to our campsite. We both needed time to absorb the profound audience we had just experienced. Later that day I read through the proposal, which reflected what the monks saw as being the role of the monastery in the emerging century.

The Karsha Gompa Educational and Cultural Project included a well-documented business plan

which allowed for the establishment of a library, school of philosophy and two hostel blocks, to be built just below the village. Teachers' salaries together with project supervision were also detailed. A similar project included adult literacy classes, women's empowerment and an environmental project to plant tree saplings in Karsha and the surrounding villages. A third project involved the sponsorship of a monk: US\$20 a month would cover the monk's boarding, medical, clothing and personal expenses. As far as the sponsorship of monks was concerned, I had seen many similar proposals in other parts of Ladakh that were desperate for funding. However, the most visible beneficiaries of financial support are usually the monasteries themselves. In 1971, the Indian scholar Romi Khosla travelled to the Zaskar region. Afterwards he wrote a provocative article in the British *Geographic Magazine*, drawing attention to the dire state of the monasteries. In his view, unless funding was forthcoming many of the ancient buildings and priceless wall paintings would not survive for another generation. What he had not anticipated was the introduction of tourism to the region. Nowadays most monasteries charge an entrance fee that makes a significant contribution to the monastery's maintenance as well as covering payments to artists to restore the wall paintings.

After the last few days in Padum and Karsha it took a little time to get back into the trekking routine. Biro was anxious to get underway as he had heard rumours that the next campsite at Pishu, about 15 kilometres down the valley, might be crowded. How he knew this I did not know but, as I set off, I passed a steady flow of trekking groups from France, Germany or Italy keen to explore a land so different from the European Alps and to discover the ancient Buddhist culture. Locked between the groups was a German family that included two delightful teenage daughters. They were experiencing the Himalaya for the first time. After exchanging greetings, my thoughts turned to my own daughter and whether she would ever appreciate her father's endeavours and perhaps one day visit Zaskar.

By the time I reached Pishu a couple of large groups had already pitched their tents on a broad meadow alongside the Zaskar River. I discreetly pitched mine in an isolated corner only to find that within a few hours the entire meadow was covered with brightly covered dome tents as each group staked out its territory. It looked more like a weekend rock concert than an overnight stage on a Himalayan trek. Giving up any thoughts of a peaceful afternoon, I accompanied Norboo and Biro to a 'parachute tent'—supplied courtesy of the Indian Air Force—to pay our camping fees. A young man from Pishu with eyes like a card shark counted out wads of rupee notes. Looking up, he grinned sheepishly before inviting us to sit on the thick wool rugs and watch a Hindi movie on a VCR powered by solar panels. I left the others to it.

In the interim, I eavesdropped on the conversations outside my tent. For some Euro trekkers their experience had not been a good one. Zaskar was full of dust and they had not been able to wash their clothes for days; the food reeked of unfamiliar spices; the crew was not punctual; some group members were sick with diarrhoea. Discontent was rife. What is it about these 'intrepid types' that makes them incapable of accepting where they are? Why do they forever need to compare or complain? They dream of lying on a beach in Bali or being back in the comfort of their own home. Why can't they accept their Himalayan experience for what it is? Why can't they take responsibility for their decision to travel here in the first place? After all, no one forced them to come. I felt like getting out of my tent and screaming at them, 'Hey, you in your windproof designer jacket, do us all a favour and go home if you don't like it!'

After returning to camp Norboo assured me that none of the trekkers would be following our route to Leh. This was not surprising for the route is seldom featured in the adventure travel catalogues. Tomorrow we would be on our own again, heading across the bridge over the swirling current of the Zaskar River to Zangla, the thriving capital of the lower Zaskar kingdom.

Up until 1990 the only way to reach Zangla (apart from returning and crossing the bridge at Padum) was to negotiate one of the infamous *jhoola*, or rope bridges. To cross you first took several deep breaths before carefully placing one foot in front of the other on a single rope, while maintaining your balance by holding onto one of the two side ropes. You didn't look down, just focused on the opposite bank. These bridges were objects of fear and concern for many early travellers and a note on their condition and location was a 'must' in most nineteenth-century journals. However, they were still commonplace in Ladakh even in the 1980s. Nowadays, though, a substantial wooden bridge has taken the place of the rope bridge. Indeed the last of the rope bridges in the Zaskar was consigned to history the best part of a decade ago.

My first visit to the village of Zangla had been in a full-length wetsuit. It was October 1979 and we had completed our first day's rafting from Padum. We were making one of the first descents of the Zaskar River and my team included two fellow Australians and two Nepalese. By early afternoon we had offloaded our gear on the banks of the river below Zangla. Sensing that a cup of tea might be in the offering, we headed towards the village. As we approached the first

houses we were greeted with apprehension. Judging by the expressions of curiosity on the children's faces—and the disbelief on the adults'—it was evident that the villagers had yet to come to terms with the brightly coloured clothing of trekking groups, let alone rafters dressed in nothing but tightly fitting wet suits.

In spite of the commotion, we were warmly received by His Majesty, Sonam Tundup Namgyal, King of Zangla—a kindly old man who did not display any outward signs of royalty. Indeed, judging by his appearance, he could have been anyone's grandfather. Led by what seemed to be the entire village, we were taken to a modest house just above a row of ancient *chortens* in the centre of the village. We made ourselves at home and enjoyed tea and biscuits in the company of the king's dogs, corgi-sized lookalikes that were his pride and joy. It was the start of a firm friendship. On future visits he would come down to the river and offer his blessing. Yet in spite of his blessing and our assurances, he consistently declined to step aboard our rafts for a short paddle down the river.

From his palace the king could see the village of Pishu on the far side of the Zaskar River that, together with the nearby villages of Honia, Pidmu and Hanumil, forms one of the tiniest kingdoms in the Himalaya. He was a popular ruler who took a keen interest in the welfare of his villagers. When he died in 1987, he was succeeded by his son Nima Norbu Namgyal. The current sovereign now splits his commitments between his time in Zangla and working for one of the government departments in Leh, a fine example of a modern-day working monarch.

Since my first visit to Zangla the village had been connected by dirt road to Padum. More recently a modern school building had also been constructed, while steps were being taken to improve the facilities of the nunnery at the far end of the village. A concrete irrigation channel was also being constructed to eventually provide hydro-electricity. A prominent TV mast had also been erected just outside the village to bring 'Doordarshan', the national government-run TV channel, to the homes in the Zaskar. Although it might have come as a shock to visitors, some of the villagers in Zangla had already purchased TV sets from Leh to avail them of this new service.

After crossing the wooden bridge over the Zaskar River, Norboo and I spent no more than an hour in Zangla. The village was practically deserted. Most were working in the fields or on the nearby irrigation channel and, to cap it all, we could not even get a cup of tea.

Heading up above the village, we reached the crumbling fort commemorating Zangla's bygone glory. As we took in the views across the broad valley to the previous night's campsite and the high barren ridges that dwarfed Pishu, I was aware that this would be my last contact with villages until I reached the Indus Valley. It was already late morning, the sun was burning hot and we still had four or five hours' trek in front of us. If all went to plan we would camp that night at the base of the Cha Cha La. Tomorrow we would cross the first of a series of high remote passes. In a couple of weeks we would hopefully be within striking distance of the Indus Valley and Leh, the ancient capital of Ladakh.

## **CHAPTER 12**

### **The Flight of the Wind Horse**

Norboo Tsering was in good spirits as we reached the Cha Cha La. Before I had time to catch my breath, he was busy gathering small boulders to build a rock cairn. He moved around with a lightness of step that gave little indication we were in the vicinity of 5000 metres. Full of energy, he attached to the rock cairn a string of prayer flags he had purchased from the village store in Zangla the previous day. On each of the yellow, green, red, white and blue prayer flags was imprinted a 'Wind Horse', a Buddhist symbol of prosperity. If your Wind Horse is high then you will share life's good fortunes; if low you may be subject to constant misfortune. By attaching the prayer flags to the pass, Norboo would not only be placating the gods of the pass but also increasing the chances of improving his fortune, in this case in hope of a safe passage for the days ahead through the gorges.

Few corners of the Himalaya are as wild and remote as the Zaskar Range. Jagged peaks rise to over 6000 metres and gorges are so deep that the sun rarely penetrates their depths for more than a few hours each day. This was the terrain we would traverse for the next week as we made our way towards the Indus Valley. It was also a stage of my trek that even today is followed by only a handful of Ladakhi villagers and foreign trekkers.

The route over the Cha Cha La (4850 metres) and the Zalong La (5020 metres) to the Markha Valley is by no means accessible throughout the year. During the winter the river levels drop to easily fordable levels, although most of the villagers in the Zaskar follow a direct route walking down the thick cover of ice that forms over the Zaskar River at this time of the year. By late May the water levels rise with the spring snow melt until during the summer the river levels are dangerously high. It is only in the autumn that the rivers are again fordable. It was the third week of August and by my calculations a little too early to guarantee a safe passage through the gorges. This had been a cause of concern for me ever since setting out. If the water levels were too high or the current too swift then I would have to return to Zaskar. I would be left with no alternative but to follow another, far longer trek route to Leh that would leave me weeks behind schedule. I had no choice but to put my faith in the Wind Horse.

Although this vast wilderness region is remote, it has for centuries been known to the Changpa, the nomadic herders living close to the Tibetan border. Until a generation ago they would load bags of salt gathered from the vast brackish lakes close to the Tibetan border and set off for the Zaskar. They would take up to a month to reach the villages in time for the harvest where they would trade their bags of salt as well as sheep and goat's wool for barley grain. After a few weeks they would return through the gorges to their high, remote grazing pastures before the onset of winter.

The Changpa were one of the earliest inhabitants of Ladakh, selfsufficient nomads grazing their yaks, goats and horses on the high windswept borderlands of Tibet. They lived there then as they do now: in tents made from animal hide, only returning to the relative shelter of the valleys in winter where they weave and live off their produce— butter, cheese and meat—to ward off the intense winter cold. It was only when irrigation was introduced to Ladakh by migrants from Baltistan and lower down the Indus Valley that settlements were established in the valleys of Ladakh and Zaskar. Over the centuries, trade evolved between the Changpa and the villagers.

I first trekked over the Cha Cha La in 1981. Our campsite on the far side of the pass was covered with millions of sheep pellets that formed a remarkably soft covering on the frozen ground. At the time, the camp was favoured by the Changpa as they made their way to the Zaskar. However, 1981 was one of the last years that the Changpa traded with the Zaskar. Trade that had lasted for centuries was no longer economically viable. Demand for salt had outstripped supply and villagers sought cheaper sources. Well before the road to Padum was completed that year, Lobsang Tshering, the storekeeper at Zangla, told us he had been forced to travel to Leh to purchase extra supplies.

As soon as Norboo was satisfied with his efforts on the pass he headed back down to help Biro and Dilip. I had the world to myself. At first glance the scree slopes appeared barren. At this altitude it was a wonder that anything could survive. Yet on closer inspection hardy delphinium with distinctive purple lobes, together with the reddish white petals of the *Pleurospermum govanianum lobes*, firmly entwined in the shale. Tiny edelweiss also seemed to positively thrive in this seemingly inhospitable location.

Well before he reached the pass I could hear Biro cursing his mules and anybody else in earshot. The mule loads were constantly shifting and no amount of refastening seemed to do the trick. Only when Biro came in sight of the prayer flags did his mood change. Gathering a handful of rocks he carefully placed them on the mound.

'*Kiki So So La Gallo*,' he repeated; literally 'May the Gods be Victorious'. Yet the worst of the day was not over. Within minutes of commencing our descent Biro went into overdrive. Yelling for us to hold onto the mules he stormed ahead, almost breaking into a run as he searched in vain for a trail. It was soon evident that no one had been our way for months. For the next three hours we negotiated scree slopes, cleared rocks from ledges and walked down a narrow gorge that gave us our first initiation into walking in icy cold water.

By the time I hobbled into camp I was done for. The previous day my Wind Horse had hit an all time low. Having lost an almost non-existent trail in the gorge beyond Zangla I had pushed some willow branches to one side. As I let go, one branch swung back at me with such a force that a twig shot straight into the side of my right knee. Immediately, there was a short, sharp, stabbing pain. 'Bugger,' was about all I could say as I cradled my knee. To my horror no amount of prodding or squeezing could remove the tip of the willow branch. By a million to one chance, a piece of twig about twice the size of a matchstick had well and truly embedded itself in the muscle of my knee.

'Put your hands over your ears,' I instructed Norboo. The next moment I swore for all I was worth as Norboo poured a liberal amount of iodine into my wound. This was the start of a routine I would follow in the forthcoming days as I applied a combination of dressings, antibiotics and iodine to treat my knee.

It took us three days to negotiate the gorges. My fears about the water levels were confirmed. Even at 9am the river level rose steadily as the snows melted and flowed from unseen glaciers. Each crossing was either a 'pussy cat' or a 'tiger'. There was no in between. Fortunately most crossings fell into the former category; only occasionally would we plunge into thigh-deep water.

On the second day in the gorge the river level left us with little option but to camp by mid-morning. My knee was also throbbing. As we cleared loose scree in order to pitch our tents, I wondered whether my knee would make it. Lying down didn't help to ease the pain and by early afternoon the inside of my tent felt like a sauna, so I hobbled down to the river's edge to rest beneath a willow bush. By now the river level—and this was only a tributary we were following—had risen dramatically. I feared whether we would even be able to reach the Khurna River that we had hoped to cross the next day.

That night the weather changed. I could not believe my luck—it was raining in Ladakh. When was the Wind Horse going to change in my favour? By daybreak the sky was overcast. Dilip had already prepared a huge bowlful of porridge that I ate with all the enthusiasm of a man knowing he was in for a desperately cold day. The first river crossing was a jolt to my system. Even with my boots and two pairs of woollen socks on, the icy current numbed my toes. The fact that we could not identify any landmarks was a further cause for concern. The walls of the gorge continually merged in the distance, giving us little clue as to how far we had to go to reach the confluence of our tributary and the Khurna River. For all we knew we might not get there till the next day. High above the gorge an ancient cypress tree stood its ground in an otherwise featureless landscape. It was not until 9am that the sun finally broke through the thick grey clouds. Shafts of sun lit up the rock faces—vibrant browns, greens, yellows and coppers normally seen only at dawn. Yet the deep shadows in the depths of the gorge were a sure indication that it would be hours before the rays of sun touched the surface of the water.

Wet boots and numb feet, wet thermals and soaking wet shorts, in fact wet everything on this dismal morning. No amount of effort could lift my spirits. I lost count of the number of river crossings we made. Biro as always would lead the mules, with Lalu his strongest mule in front. The others would follow, or at least three of them—Sundari, Sumo and Chemo—would. Moti, the fifth and the only white mule, would always consider alternatives. Moti was the non-conformist. If there was a trail to follow Moti would try to find a new one. If there was a route around a willow thicket, Moti would attempt to go through it. It was the same with river crossings. While the other mules would follow each other, Moti would go his own way even if it meant being practically swept down river.

At one point the river channelled into a deep swirling torrent. There was no way to avoid what was undoubtedly a major crossing. I scrambled over a series of large boulders to a point where the river widened and the current slowed, offering me a safer path. For the first and only time I crossed a river on my own. Relying heavily on my ski pole I made it before scampering up to where Biro was about to cross.

Standing on the far bank, Biro indicated the direction he would lead Lalu, as he waved his arms above the roar of the water. Nearing the centre of the river Biro lunged forward holding tightly onto Lalu's reins. Then he was in trouble. Before he could reach my outstretched arms the current surged around his waist forcing him off balance. Summoning all my strength, I gripped his arm as he hung onto Lalu's reins. When he finally made it to the shallows Biro was spent.

Three of the mules followed. Responding to Biro's piercing whistles, they edged steadily nearer as the water lapped the underside of their loads. Then came Moti. With much prodding from Norboo and Dilip, he took his first steps into the current before stopping to ponder his future. Norboo and Dilip followed, but instead of linking arms or waiting for Biro and me to set up a rope relay, they both grabbed hold of Moti's tail. All went well until the middle of the river when Moti, for reasons best known to his maker, decided to head down river towards a sizeable rapid. Dilip and Norboo were forced to let go of his tail. Without support they lost their footholds and took a dunking. How Moti avoided the rapids and how Norboo and Dilip made it to the opposite bank was more through divine intervention—the Wind Horse perhaps—than by judgement.

I was tired, wet, cold but thankful when I at last clambered up to our camp above the confluence of our tributary and the Khurna River. A hastily prepared brew, a few telling comments about the coldness of my extremities, and a small fire made from a plentiful supply of driftwood lifted my spirits. Jokes about having '*Moti thukpa*' for dinner helped to relieve the day's fatigue.

We knew that the next series of river crossings would be the hardest. The following morning before first light we had a fire on the go and an extra ration of *thukpa* to fortify our resolve. If we could head up the Khurna River to where it meets the Khurna Sumdo—the tributary leading to the Zalung La—by mid-morning then we would be safe.

'Next time I'll bring a wetsuit and a hip flask of scotch,' I muttered to myself as the first stream of icy cold water lapped around my genitals. There could be few more excruciating ways to start the day. We were committed. At first the crossings were relatively straightforward, but as we continued the deep swirling current gave us cause for concern. Linking arms we tested the water level. Sometimes Biro and Lalu would go first, at other times Norboo would take the lead, his strong legs propelling him to the opposite bank. Dilip and I would follow, our faithful cook gripping my arm while I prodded with my ski pole as I tried to assess the current. Two and a half hours and about twenty crossings later we came to a halt. 'There it is!' Norboo exclaimed.

Although not one to get excited, he was overjoyed to recognise a landmark, a prominent rock face that marked the confluence of the Khurna River and the tributary leading to the Zalung La. Two more crossings and we had made it.

As soon as we reached the river bank, the mules were unpacked. Our spirits soared as within minutes Dilip brought his stove to life. Slurping tea and bowls of instant noodles laced with chilli, we slowly thawed. Our sodden clothes were wrung out and spread across the sun-baked boulders as we considered the next stage of the day's trek.

To reach the base of the Zalung La would not entail any problematic river crossings. There was, however, one section in the gorge where the mules would probably need to be offloaded. We faced the prospect of a tiring afternoon carrying all the gear on our backs for at least half a kilometre around a rocky exposed trail.

At first the going was easy. The tributary flowing from the Zalung La was no more than a bubbling stream. But about 3 kilometres above the confluence the trail rose up the face of a crumbling cliff side to avoid a particularly deep, narrow gorge. 'This is it,' I thought. The prospect of unloading the mules and carrying our gear around the most precipitous sections of the cliff side seemed likely. Biro, however, had other ideas. Without stopping to rest first, he went on ahead, removing the occasional loose boulder as he checked out the crumbling trail. After twenty minutes he returned, motioning for Norboo to lead Lalu up the first steep exposed section. It was another ten minutes before they reappeared. This time Biro and Norboo led the next two mules by the reins coaxing them up the switchbacks. Just this once even Moti decided that there was no alternative but to follow the other mules to the top of the ridge. Our fortunes had held again—our Wind Horse was high—as we established camp at the base of the Zalung La later that afternoon.

We deserved a rest day. The mules had not had a good feed for days and I needed to take the pressure off my still painful knee, while we also needed time to recce the approach to the next pass. Although Norboo and I had been over the nearby Rubering La to the Markha Valley none of us had been over the Zalung La.

The next morning, however, was anything but a 'rest day'. Before I had finished breakfast Biro and Norboo were set to go. The dynamic twosome set a cracking pace and it was not long

before my knee and energy left me way behind. I felt pathetic. 'Go on, I'll catch you,' was about all I could mutter. Within minutes I had lost sight of them.

At first I thought I had lost my way as I slowly negotiated a boulder-strewn gorge above the main valley. I couldn't see any sign of footprints or any evidence of a track. I remained apprehensive until after the best part of an hour the gorge widened into a huge amphitheatre covered in scree slopes dotted with juniper bushes and the occasional patch of button grass.

By now Biro and Norboo were well on the way to the pass. I wiped the sweat from my brow and watched as a flock of accentors settled in the button grass. A bird of prey—an eagle perhaps—hovered above the wall of the gorge. A maze of gorges and ridges stretched as far as I could see. I tried to visualise the route we had followed over the last few days but gave up in exasperation. As I settled on a boulder it gradually dawned on me that, while it was unlikely that there was anyone between me and the Cha Cha La, there was a good chance that elusive wildlife still roamed this magnificent mountain wilderness.

When Peter Matthiessen wrote *The Snow Leopard* recounting his legendary journey with the eminent zoologist George Schaller to Dolpo in northern Nepal in 1973, he created a myth that the chances of seeing the famous cat were as likely as winning the lottery. This is not the case, for given a favourable environment, infinite patience and a fair share of luck you might succeed. Above all you should not be discouraged. When the Bedi brothers—the renowned Delhi-based wildlife filmmakers—set out to film the snow leopard they spent three winters in Ladakh. They chose this area as it supports one of the highest concentrations of snow leopards in the Himalaya. I often watch my video of this magnificent footage, of the snow leopard in winter waiting for the opportunity to kill a stray yak or goat to stave off its hunger for a week or so.

On another trek, in September 1995, I had left camp early to cross the Konze La, a pass in western Ladakh. There had been an unseasonable early snowfall and I anticipated trudging through deep snow to reach the pass. While my guide and horsemen were breaking camp, I set off and climbed above the valley floor. After a couple of kilometres I stopped to watch a herd of yaks grazing on meagre pasture. At that point I sensed that I was not the only one watching the yaks. Glancing around I caught a glimpse of a large cat. I had seen enough snow leopards in zoo enclosures to know what I was looking at. It settled behind a large boulder higher up the mountain ridge. I just had a glimpse and no more but it was sufficient and for a while I did not move, hoping against hope that the elusive cat would reappear. It was not to be. Two days later my friends from Delhi contacted the office in Ladakh with an urgent request for a couple of guides to find me and escort me back to Leh. With them came a note that my mother was seriously ill in Edinburgh and that I should fly to Scotland without delay. I was later to discover that my mother had died at the same time that I had glimpsed the snow leopard.

While the winter haunts of the snow leopard have been documented their summer habitats are less well known. What is known is that the *bharal*—blue sheep—are high on the snow leopard's list of prey. If you cross the high passes late in the season you are sure to see the blue sheep grazing on the upper levels of vegetation on otherwise barren slopes. Go to the upper slopes in the vicinity of the Cha Cha La and the Zalung La and that is where they graze in the summer months in July and August. They can easily be seen coming down to the river's edge in the early morning forever wary of the lone snow leopard stalking perhaps behind a not-too-distant boulder. We had had regular sightings of the *bharal* over the last week and on one occasion I had been able to approach within 10 metres of a herd of eighteen grazing in the early morning sun. In similar circumstances and with the right *shikari*, a pair of good binoculars, sturdy boots and of course infinite patience you might just be fortunate to glimpse the long white tail of the snow leopard. If not then the backdrop of the landscape and the sheer exhilaration of exploring remote and wild places would surely be sufficient compensation.

Later that afternoon Biro and Norboo returned, announcing to my enormous relief that the route to the Zalung La (5020 metres) was not a problem. The following morning we lost little time retracing their footsteps towards the pass. While I tried my best to maintain a steady pace I was soon in agony. At times I gave myself a good talking to for being such a wimp. 'Let's face it,' I would say to myself, 'if you had broken both of your legs and had to crawl to Leh then you would have something to complain about. All you've got is a bloody twig in your knee.' My tirade did nothing to reduce the pain. My knee was no longer responding to analgesics and each step was met with an excruciating jab of pain that left me close to despair. I made a mental calculation of how many days (about five days I thought) I would need to make it to Leh where a doctor could extract the twig now lodged deeply in the ligaments of my knee. I lost track of the times I cursed myself for being so stupid as to walk blindly into the willow nearly a week ago.

Just below the summit of the pass I sat on a boulder to ease the strain on my knee and let Biro, Dilip and Norboo stride past me. I watched Biro bend forward into the wind as it whipped across the crest of the Zalung La. The clouds raced across the darkening sky, creating endless streams of darkness and intense, almost golden, light on the unending slopes and towering rock

spires that guarded the pass. Norboo seemed unperturbed, chanting under his breath as he unfurled his prayer flags. Within minutes the sun re-appeared and the wind dropped. We had completed what was the hardest section of our trek through Ladakh. In spite of my pain, the Wind Horse had swung in our favour.

'Your face has changed,' Norboo observed.

It had indeed. I had been sitting at camp the following morning redressing my knee when I noticed the tip of the twig protruding slightly below the surface of the skin.

'Tweeeeeeezers!' I yelled, anxious not to move. Within seconds I had extracted the piece of twig that had been the cause of my pain for the past week. I was overjoyed. But as I cleaned the festering wound I could not believe my eyes. A few days before I had heard a sharp crack in my knee and now, lo and behold, I could see the tip of a second twig just below the surface.

With tweezers in hand, a second twig almost the size of the first was slowly extracted. In a moment the intense pain had gone. I placed the pieces of the twig in an empty matchbox with a view to either framing them when I returned home ... or using them as toothpicks!

Within a few hours we had joined the popular trekking trail ascending from the Markha Valley. Stopping for tea we felt mighty pleased with ourselves. Ducking inside a large tent that had seen better days of service as a parachute in the Indian Air Force we made ourselves at home. Our host was a jovial woman possessed with the kind of welcoming smile that is plastered on tourist posters. She came from the nearby village of Hankar and during the summer made a little cash selling tea, biscuits and soft drinks to trekkers. Before she could even so much as ask where we had come from, Biro was on fast forward describing our route and the worst of the river crossings that had by now risen to over waist high. It was like the proverbial fisherman's story.

'By the time he gets back to Manali the current will be up to his neck,' Norboo chuckled, 'or even higher.'

Our camp on the Nimaling Plains was established at base of the Gongmaru La (5160 metres). By now we were just one pass short of the Indus Valley. From camp the windswept yak pastures afforded inspiring views that stretched across the numerous folds of the Zaskar Range, while immediately to the south the snowy flanks of Kangyanste rose to 6400 metres. Throughout the summer the villagers from the Markha Valley would lead their flocks and impressive herds of yak to graze on the high pastures. They would take it in turns to watch the animals, living for months at a time in stone shelters on the perimeter of the plains.

An almost toothless woman was taken aback as Norboo and I approached the nearest shelter. The elements had taken their toll on this frail elderly figure. She was bent nearly double and squinted at us with bloodshot eyes caused by a lifetime of lighting smoky fires. A wisp of smoke from a gap in the stonework was a sure indication that a yak dung fire had been smouldering since dawn. Outside the wooden doorway discarded plastic bottles and tin cans were scattered on a deep layer of sheep pellets. A mangy dog roped to a post cowered as we passed.

'*Julay, Julay*,' Norboo greeted the startled woman. Summoning a faint smile she beckoned us over. We learned she was from the village of Hankar—the highest in the Markha Valley—and migrated to Nimaling each summer. Disregarding further pleasantries Norboo asked whether he could purchase some fresh yoghurt. The woman shook her head. Apparently the yoghurt had already been made into butter and cheese that would be sold off in villages close to Leh at the end of the season.

Later that day the woman's son wandered over to our encampment. Before we could even offer him a cup of sweet milk tea he pulled from under his voluminous sleeve a glass jar full to the brim of yoghurt that he had taken from his personal stores. It was an act of unqualified generosity. Warming his hands on Dilip's kerosene stove he accepted nothing in return. He was only here for a day or two to check on his family's yaks. Tomorrow he would go back down the valley to Hankar to help prepare the fields for the harvest. In a week the harvest would be well underway in the Markha Valley and all available hands would be needed. After that the men would return and perhaps make a journey to Leh before leading their flocks and yak herd back down to the shelter of the valley.

Here the seasons pass quickly and by October the first of the winter snows settle on the higher grounds. The temperatures drop dramatically and the *bharal* make their way down followed by packs of wolves and the occasional lone snow leopard in search of prey. Only the Wind Horse imprinted on the prayer flags at the top of the Gongmaru La is left to witness the passage of winter on the Nimaling Plains.



## **CHAPTER 13**

### **The King's Palace**

There was something immensely calming about visiting Hemis monastery, founded in the seventeenth century by Sengge Namgyal, one of Ladakh's most famous rulers. Perhaps it was the tranquil location in a narrow gorge just to the south of the Indus Valley or merely that I had been looking forward to reaching the monastery since I left Zaskar. Whatever the reason, I was totally content as I sat on the concrete steps below the Assembly Hall and listened to the slow, sonorous rhythmic chant of the hundred or so monks who were attending the prayer session.

It had not been until late afternoon that Norboo and I had entered the monastery courtyard. By then the daily jeep tours from Leh had departed and we had the place almost to ourselves. As we sat on the steps I took stock of the situation. No one it seemed had noticed us. At that moment, however, we were startled by the approach of a young monk dangling a huge bunch of keys from his waist. He had seen us arrive and it was his duty to accompany tourists, even the late ones. Motioning to us to follow him, he negotiated a rickety wooden staircase leading to a small temple. I took a few seconds to adjust my eyes to the dim light before we slipped off our shoes and entered the musty confines of a dark hall where a huge statue of Padmasambhava—the Guru Ringpoche—dominated the inner sanctum.

I stood in the presence of Padmasambhava with mixed emotions. At first I reminded myself that what I was looking at was only a huge statue, nothing more, and that it had little relevance to the teachings of the Gautama Buddha—the Historical Buddha—who opposed any depiction of the Buddha in human form. Yet the Guru Ringpoche's face radiated a sense of supreme contentment that I found impossible to ignore. In the almost eerie silence my mind wandered back to the early days of my trek. I reflected again on my experiences since leaving the *sadhu's* cave above Gaumukh and also tried to imagine what I would encounter during the months ahead. The more I thought about it the more I felt an overwhelming sense of wellbeing. Although I had no religious convictions I nonetheless felt confident that everything would somehow fall into place as I made my way to Kashmir.

It was sometime before our attentive monk returned with the now familiar jangling of his keys. As Norboo re-emerged from the shadows of the upper balcony we stepped back down the wooden ladder to the main courtyard. By then the afternoon prayer session was over and a group of novice monks were chattering among themselves as they hurriedly caught up on their day. Our young monk was keen to join them. After making a suitable donation, we exchanged '*Julays*' before he headed over to join his friends while Norboo and I returned to our campsite about a kilometre below the tiny village of Hemis.

The previous day had been a long one. From our camp at Nimaling it had taken little more than an hour to reach the rock cairn on the Gongmaru La (5150 metres). After Norboo had attached a further row of prayer flags we had descended the best part of 1500 metres to camp. The trek to Hemis was easier on the knees. We had followed a trail that wound down past ancient *chortens* towards the Indus Valley before diverting up to Hemis.

By mid-morning we had established our camp in a small grassy enclosure that afforded fine views of the rugged flanks of the Ladakh Range north of the Indus Valley. At last we felt that we were in striking distance of Leh. Over lunch Norboo, Biro and I planned the next few days. We decided that it was preferable to avoid the main road to Leh on the north side of the Indus and head instead along the less travelled road to Stok village. By our reckoning we would reach the fabled capital of Ladakh in three days time.

The following morning I set off at first light for Stok leaving Norboo and Dilip to strike camp. In a couple of hours I was close to Stakna monastery, set on a sugarloaf mountain beside the Indus River. I could make out the distinct profile of Tikse monastery, also on a hillock, about 6 kilometres away on the opposite side of the Indus Valley. Like two medieval citadels, Stakna and Tikse represent rival Buddhist sects separated by the silent flow of the 'Lion River'.

As I wandered past Stakna village I heard a rooster crowing, a comforting, domestic sound that I had not heard since leaving Manali six weeks ago. Easing off my rucksack I sipped from my water bottle and watched pairs of magpies forage for grain in the recently harvested barley fields. Bright yellow sunflowers clung to dry-stone walls while the upper branches of the poplar trees swayed gently in the crisp morning air.

Although I had made an early start, I was in no less of a hurry to cover the almost deserted road as quickly as possible. I cleared my mind and focused on my arrival at Leh. Would there be any messages for me? Would my friends be there to meet me? What would I have for my first meal? Although my diet of rice, dhal and vegetables or vegetable *thukpa* had satisfied most of my gastronomic cravings, I was by now dreaming of such simple delights as a juicy apple or spreading local apricot jam on freshly baked Ladakhi bread.

Two hours beyond Stakna I recognised the familiar profile of the Stok Palace, nowadays dwarfed by a modern TV tower. By noon I was easing off my boots in the shade of an ancient poplar grove directly below the palace.

Norboo, Biro and Dilip took hours to arrive. Their trek from Hemis had not been one of their happiest mornings. By the time they reached Stok, Dilip had a pounding headache, Biro was complaining about the lack of feed for his mules and Norboo had sore feet after wandering a few extra kilometres when a villager swore he saw someone looking like me heading off down a sidetrack. After establishing our camp I suggested we took a rest day before completing the final stage to Leh. One day, I reasoned, would not make much of a difference to my schedule and would give Biro a chance to find a place where he could leave his mules for a week. It would also give Norboo and Dilip time to recover, for I sometimes forgot that they too had walked the same distance as I had from Manali.

Early the next day—our rest day—Norboo and I climbed a flight of wooden stairs and entered the second-storey courtyard of the Stok Palace. A guide barely out of his teens unlocked the door to the first of the small museums. Before we had even so much as adjusted our eyes to the dim recess our guide hit the fast forward button trotting out an incomprehensible list of Ladakhi sovereigns that had ruled Ladakh since the eleventh century. Some he repeated as if by mentioning them he would gain a better rebirth or a bigger tip. It was only when he heard the arrival of a well-heeled group of European tourists that he finally left us to our own devices.

Many of the highlights of Ladakh's chequered history were represented by the rich assortment of royal *thangkas*, ancient muskets and a ceremonial robe fit for a king with an ample girth. There was also a stuffed snow leopard. In an adjacent room devoted to more contemporary affairs hung numerous black-and-white photographs of the current Rani, the Queen of Stok, posing with Indian dignitaries. The regal collection included a shot of Britain's Princess Anne who had visited Leh in the 1980s as patron of the Save the Children charity. A few stuffed corgis would not have been out of place!

The Rani's eldest son runs the palace and oversees their land. From the rooftop of the palace he can savour a 180-degree view of the Indus Valley, including distant views of Leh and the King's Palace, his ancestral home until his family was defeated by Zorawar Singh and exiled to Stok in 1836.

At the crack of dawn the following day, I was finally on my way to Leh. Setting off at my usual rapid pace—varying between 5 to 6 kilometres an hour—I was keen to complete the 20-kilometre stage by mid-morning. I was also intent on getting a head start on Norboo, Biro and Dilip, who would follow together with all our gear in an overloaded jeep. However, in spite of them experiencing a few delays packing up, I was less than halfway when their jeep pulled up beside me. I waved them on.

An hour later I passed the highest golf course in the world and possibly the only one without a blade of grass. The rush hour was at its peak as buses, trucks and jeeps passed at less than breakneck speed. For the final 2 kilometres I walked up the 'Old Road' into town, past small hotels, Internet cafés and outdoor gear shops—a mini Kathmandu and a sure indication that Leh was rapidly adjusting to the tourist season.

I headed for the Lotus Hotel, a modest, recently constructed hotel located at Karzoo about a kilometre north of the Leh bazaar. I could not have wished for a better welcome. My friend and former guide Richen Shamshu and his father, Gombu Shamshu, were there to meet me. Before I could even take off my rucksack two fine white *khartas*, or ceremonial scarves, were draped around my neck. I couldn't believe that I'd actually made it. It was 30 August and the prospect of week or so in Leh with a comfortable bed and the first hot shower since leaving Manali was almost too good to contemplate.

Examining my scrawny physique in the mirror, I discovered I now looked like a tragically thin Santa Claus. After tipping my trekking gear onto my bed, I consigned an assortment of cotton shirts, walking pants and putrid-smelling socks to the *dobi wallah*. He would certainly have his work cut out judging by the amount of dirt and grime they'd accumulated over the last two months. Next on the agenda was a prolonged hot shower, before trimming my beard and attempting to cut the fringe of my hair. I then considered what came so naturally after completing three and a half months on the trail: another walk.

Ten minutes later I was in the Leh bazaar and on my way up to the King's Palace. After weeks on the trail it took time to adjust to the stench of urine and the sight of fresh turds beside the track. Small urchins with runny noses and wearing hand-me-down pants threw stones at scraggy dogs that cowered in the recesses of the alleyways leading up to the imposing entrance gate. After I had paid my Rs100 (US\$2), I gazed up at what had been until recently a crumbling seven-storey structure that dominated Leh's modest skyline. I made my way along darkened passages, edging forward, unsure of my bearings until I arrived at a makeshift ladder. Climbing hand over foot on the uneven rungs, I reached a chamber illuminated on one side by bright shafts of sunlight pouring through an upper window.

The former palace was abuzz with activity as teams of workers helped to restore the palace. Labourers from Bengal and Kashmir, infilled the outer walls with boulders and dry cement. Carpenters hammered and chiselled the decrepit doorframes and replaced ancient wooden pillars with seasoned timbers. Painters stripped layers of flaking paint off the plastered walls and prepared the surface for artists to paint fresh Buddhist motifs. I wandered over to a vantage point on an upper storey that afforded a panorama of Leh, while to the south on the far side of the Indus Valley I saw the trail leading to Stok that I had followed a couple of days before.

From my perspective it was easy to imagine the palace's pivotal role in Ladakh's cultural history. In its early days it had been the seat of power for Sengge Namgyal (1616-42), one of Ladakh's most ambitious rulers. Yet in his youth Sengge Namgyal was not typical of one whose prime duty was to defend his kingdom. He was a devout Buddhist who spent the early years of his life studying the sutras. In particular, he was attracted to a new order—the Druk-pa—and helped to establish many monasteries in Ladakh, including Hemis and Stakna together with Bardan in Zaskar. The king's monasteries still play a vital role in Ladakh's culture, rivalling the Gelugs-pa monasteries patronised by His Holiness the Dalai Lama in such locations as Likir, Spituk and Tikse in the Indus Valley as well as Phugtal and Karsha in Zaskar.

By the time Sengge Namgyal assumed the throne he had reconciled his religious teachings with the necessity of defending his kingdom. His ambition was to restore Ladakh to something of its former glory and he assembled armies to annex Zaskar and Guge in West Tibet, which had at one time or another been part of the Ladakh kingdom. It marked the beginning of a turbulent era in the kingdom's history. For nearly 200 years Ladakh had withstood the rising tide of Islam as armies from Kashmir, Baltistan and Central Asia mounted attacks with increasing regularity. Indeed, the Victory Fort and monastery on the ridge directly above the palace had been built to commemorate Sengge Namgyal's father Tashi Namgyal's (1555-75) defence of the kingdom. It had been, however, a premature victory. By 1600 Ladakh was overrun by a powerful army from Baltistan that plundered the villages and monasteries for the best part of a decade. This was the political climate preceding Sengge Namgyal's reign: it was a time when the traditional seats of power in Ladakh—its upper kingdom run from the nearby Shey Palace, the lower kingdom ruled from Basgo 50 kilometres down the Indus valley—were united. Leh was the new capital with the King's Palace prospering during the occasional periods of peace and stability. During this period, Leh emerged as an important trading centre, linking the markets of Kashmir, the Punjab and northern India with those of Kashgar and Central Asia.

Sengge Namgyal's expenditure on the monasteries of Ladakh made a significant dent in the local exchequer. It also ultimately contributed to Ladakh's defeat by the powerful Balti and Moghul forces towards the end of his reign in 1639. Following this defeat, a tribute to the Moghul emperor eventually resulted in a mosque being built at the head of the Leh bazaar in 1663.

Not long after Sengge Namgyal's death, his son Deldan Namgyal hastened Ladakh's demise. Deldan Namgyal declared war on the Great Fifth Dalai Lama and the Tibetan-Mongol army. Given the size of the Tibetan army it was not the wisest of moves and the Ladakhi king was eventually forced to ask the Governor of Kashmir for assistance. The outcome was that Kashmir and Tibet negotiated terms set out in the Treaty of Tingmosgang in 1684 that significantly reduced Ladakh's territory. Guge was annexed to Tibet while Kashmir secured a monopoly of the *pashm* trade from West Tibet, thereby ensuring Kashmir's control over the lucrative shawl-wool trade until well into the nineteenth century.

Locked between the rulers of Tibet and Kashmir, Ladakh's fortunes remained by and large unchanged throughout the eighteenth century. Then, in late October 1820, the noted British traveller William Moorcroft and his travelling companion George Trebeck entered Leh bazaar with their tiny caravan. Moorcroft, a veterinary surgeon, was employed as Superintendent of the Stables for the East India Company. As he trekked from Kullu Valley and over the Baralacha La, Moorcroft set his sights on acquiring prime horse stud from Kashgar. However, permission to cross the Karakoram Pass was as hard to come by then as it is now. All he could do was wait. It took two years before the Kashgar authorities eventually rejected his application, but in the

interim, Moorcroft had developed firm friendships with the Ladakhi people and was anxious to represent their interests in what were very uncertain times.

Between 1820 and 1822 Moorcroft realised that there was considerable mutual benefit in a trade agreement between Ladakh and the East India Company. He wrote to the authorities in Calcutta outlining his views, which the East India Company chose to ignore. Notwithstanding the Treaty of Tingmosgang, the last thing the British wanted was to upset Ranjit Singh—the Sikh Maharajah—who at the time held the delicate balance of power across North West India.

It would be another fifty years before Moorcroft's vision of trade with Central Asia was realised. In 1870 and 1873 Douglas Forsyth, the British envoy, led a mission via Leh across the Karakoram Pass to Sinkiang. But by now Ladakh had lost its last vestige of independence. Following the Treaty of Amritsar in 1846, Gulab Singh became the first Maharajah of Jammu and Kashmir, and that included Ladakh.

Nowadays trade of a different kind takes place in the Leh bazaar. Kashmiri salesmen pace the footpath urging unwary tourists to step inside their showrooms. On the footpath, Ladakhi ladies sell freshly picked vegetables, apricots and apples. Teenagers, sauntering aimlessly, wear jeans with the hems dragging along the footpath. Soldiers gather for a showing of the next Bollywood blockbuster. Traffic police direct the modern-day caravans—the truck convoys—as they leave for Kashmir or the Kullu Valley. Travel agents advertise budget treks, jeep safaris and buses to Manali and Delhi. There are no end of traveller's cafés—some trying to cover all bases with signs proclaiming their specialty is Indian, Chinese, Italian, Continental, Israeli, Kashmiri, Tandoori and Internet— and a brand new ATM has been installed outside the entrance to the State Bank of India. Yet some things never change. The archaic Post Office in the main bazaar remains just the same; its dark and dusty interior offers little confidence that anything will actually reach its destination.

Ladakh is one of the few places in India where foreigners outnumber domestic tourists. Travel writers describe them as 'quality tourists' keen to learn something of Ladakh's culture and history. Before 1979 they had no option but to undertake a two-day bus ride from Kashmir, a journey to humble the most experienced traveller. On arrival in Leh all they could usually request was a bucket of hot water to wash off the dust. Leh was promoted as an adventure destination and there were few five-star concessions.

It was during those years soon after Ladakh was opened to tourism that I first visited the town. A French writer introduced me to his close Ladakhi friend, Wangchuk Shamshu. Thoughtful, well spoken and with a waistline that reflected a love of his mother's cooking, Wangchuk was at the time considering whether to embark on a career in tourism. A firm friendship was in the making. Over the seasons Wangchuk and I led many treks together. In 1987 I invited him to help establish World Expeditions (India), an agency that specialised in adventure travel. In 1990 he came to Australia and I can still picture him on his hands and knees teaching my daughter how to crawl backwards. In 1995, it was Wangchuk who came to Leh to break the news that my mother had died suddenly in Edinburgh and that I would have to return immediately to Scotland.

Wangchuk had flown in from Delhi the day after I arrived. I was, as always, delighted to see him. 'Good to know you are going to come with me (on the trek),' I laughed, as we hugged each other warmly. His eyes twinkled merrily before he made the profound observation that I had lost weight. What did he think I would look like after nearly four months on the trail—a Sumo wrestler? Depending on the occasion I had a variety of ways of greeting Wangchuk. There was the mock deferential 'Lama Ji' when I needed his advice on something. In lighthearted moments I would address him as the 'Rolex Lama' on account of the time he was given a gold Rolex watch as a tip after accompanying a somewhat wealthy European tourist in South India. Then there was 'Chopper Lama', in reference to the fact that Wangchuk was probably the only Ladakhi who had a financial interest in a helicopter used for the company's heli-skiing program out of Manali. However for today it was just plain 'Wangchuk'. We then got down to catching up on the news—and gossip—from the Delhi office and the world at large. I also peppered him with questions about Kashmir for I was still concerned about what route I would follow during the later stages of my trek. 'Don't worry,' was his stock answer, so for the time being, I didn't!

Wangchuk's arrival coincided with the annual Ladakh festival, a two-week event that had been instigated by the Jammu and Kashmir Tourist Department in 1995 to celebrate Ladakh's history and culture. It is of course primarily staged to increase the number of tourists visiting Leh, and in this respect is no different in concept to many other cultural festivals around the world keen to attract the tourist dollar. However, for me the festival was a bonus and I looked forward to attending some of the events.

The opening day of the festival commenced with a parade through the main bazaar. Standing on the rooftop of a restaurant with Wangchuk I watched as the first of the performers, a group of

Ladakhi women in elegant scarlet and black *chubas*—traditional, ankle-length tunics— soaked up the applause while hundreds of cameras clicked incessantly in the harsh sunlight. On cue the women stopped and exchanged glances before singing a Ladakhi melody while gracefully dancing a few steps. After a moment they composed themselves before moving a further 200 metres down the bazaar to repeat their performance.

There was nothing regimental about this parade. School children with uniforms neatly pressed for the day turned to their teacher for last-minute instructions. A truckload of monks waved hesitantly to the crowds of onlookers. Members of the Ladakh Hill Council, their name tags fastened to colourful rosettes, paced forward in their deepred or grey *chuba*. As Wangchuk pointed out these politicians were of a different mould, respected and trusted by the people. The local polo team sat atop sturdy ponies, waving their mallets in the air as they soaked up the loud ovation. Their reception left no doubt that polo was big in Ladakh. A Tibetan cultural troupe from Dharamsala in Himachal Pradesh added a further dimension to the festival, anxious to ensure that their cultural traditions—Tibetan opera in this case—are retained until such time as they can return to their homeland. Several yaks and Bactrian camels, far from their homelands on the borders of Tibet and the eastern Karakoram, spat and balked at their reins as they made up the rear of the procession.

In an hour it was all over. The parade had passed. Cameras were packed into rucksacks as the tourists headed back to their hotels. Some of the Ladakhi contingent made their way to the polo ground to hear speeches from politicians and dignitaries. I noted the date and time of the polo match and an archery contest that I wanted to attend before continuing my trek. I also invited Wangchuk to join me although I knew that there would only be an outside chance of him going anywhere once he got into his daily routine of commuting between his home and the Lotus Hotel.

Even though the festival was in full swing, the Hotel Lotus was an oasis of tranquility. I had time to read over my notes and drink bottomless cups of green tea in the sunny courtyard. I also found time to catch up on news from home. By now my emails had reduced to a trickle. The auto reply stating that I would be away trekking until October had achieved the desired result. Only my closest friends ignored it and maintained communication with me. My daughter rang me to make one last impassioned plea to become a boarder at her school next year. She also had a sore foot caused by jumping out of her mother's car before it had stopped. No bones had been broken, only a teenage ego. I hardly got a word in edgeways to describe my life and death encounter with a willow twig. After fifteen minutes the phone line went dead. It was the last time I would talk to my daughter until I reached Kashmir in six weeks' time.

Each morning Wangchuk would walk briskly into the Hotel Lotus garden at around 8am and order tea and freshly baked unleavened bread that he periodically dipped in the thick apricot jam. Like two old men at a bowling club, we talked of past times. We argued endlessly: on the future of Kashmir, on whether Beijing should host the 2008 Olympic Games, or on whether the Changpa nomads needed assistance from foreign foundations. Our arguments took the form of question-and-answer sessions—a system practiced by novice monks in the Buddhist monasteries. Nothing was taken too seriously. I was a past master at reading between the lines during our conversations. 'I see' was Wangchuk's way of expressing that he understood my position but didn't necessarily agree. 'You are right' meant that I might be right but I shouldn't bank on it. 'Thank you, Garry' meant he had made the winning point, while 'You must come for dinner' meant that it had been ages since I had visited his home and he didn't want any excuses. I had none.

On my third night in Leh Wangchuk drove me to his family house about 3 kilometres north of Leh. We stepped up the outer staircase and through a modest wooden door before we made our way down a dimly lit passageway. Pushing a curtain aside, I entered the family living room. Wangchuk immediately took me by the hand and led me over to his mother. At eighty-four she was a sprightly soul who insisted on standing to welcome me. As she acknowledged my greeting, her eyes, edged by deep wrinkles, reflected that all was well with her world.

Sitting beside Wangchuk, I took in the changes to their home since my last visit. Everything seemed in place. An array of copper bowls decorated with intricate silver work—the pride of any Ladakhi family— was displayed on shelves across one wall of the living area. Thick, coarsely woven woollen carpets were spread across polished floorboards. In front of me were several low, brightly painted wooden benches on which dinner would be served. The only modern concession was a large TV in one corner tuned to the BBC World News.

Judging by the chatter emerging from behind a curtain next to the living room, Wangchuk's niece and her friend were leaving nothing to chance. A pressure cooker occasionally hissed to life as they chopped vegetables in great haste. When dinner was ready Wangchuk's niece, an elegant woman with high cheekbones and her long black hair tied back, proudly served a steaming hot vegetable *thukpa*. Normally this would have been enough for me, but not tonight.

Bowls of rice, dhal and vegetables and *palak paneer* ensured that I wouldn't go hungry for days.

Wangchuk quietly poured himself another tot of rum. Directing his gaze around the room, he speculated on the future of his family. His wife was a successful doctor in Delhi, his two teenage children had done brilliantly in their exams and his business interests ensured he had few financial worries. At times like these he seemed content to be just part of the family. Glancing to one side, I watched as his mother spun her prayer wheel and rubbed her rosary as she quietly recited a Buddhist mantra. She had eaten already. Wangchuk's father was missing. Each evening he recited his prayers alone in a small room on the ground floor of the house. Although well into his eighties he still found time everyday to walk to the bazaar, meet friends and keep an eye on the world. After that he occasionally visited the Hotel Lotus before returning home, a roundtrip of 5 to 6 kilometres.

After dinner Wangchuk turned to his mother who slowly made her way towards me. Placing an impressive *kharta* over my shoulders she whispered to her son. 'She says you are a very brave man,' laughed Wangchuk, who had already briefed his mother on the duration of my trek.

'Tell her that if she was twenty years younger she would have to come with me,' I replied. It was a comment made in the full knowledge of her history.

Wangchuk's mother's family was part of the Leh trading legend. They had owned the only private *sarai*—camping site—in Leh located just north of the main bazaar. His mother could still recall the excitement as the caravans arrived from Central Asia. She spoke Yarkani and would spend hours in conversation with the mule attendants as they offloaded boxes of high-grade *charas*, silk yarn and carpets, or reloaded consignments of ginger, cinnamon and cardamom that had been brought on the backs of mules from Amritsar or Kashmir. During the 1940s trade was subject to the uncertain political situation in Sinkiang (today's Chinese province of Xianjiang) and by the end of the decade it was all over. Following the communist revolution in China in 1949, the borders between Sinkiang and India were sealed and the trail over the Karakoram Pass closed.

The following morning, determined to see something of the festival's activities, I headed down to a grassy clearing alongside the Indus River to attend an archery contest. The 100 or so participants were from Tikse village about 15 kilometres up the Indus Valley. Most were seated under a large cotton marquee on woollen rugs set alongside rows of low wooden tables. There was an air of expectancy about the day. For the women the contest was an opportunity to dress up. They wore their long tunics complete with jewellery that included their family heirloom—the *perak*, an elaborate headdress studded with turquoise sewn on a black cloth. The men wore elegant *chubas*, their full-length woollen scarlet tunics, and brightly coloured cloth boots turned up at the toe, although some of the younger men displayed trainers purchased in the Leh bazaar.

Five musicians, three drummers and two playing horns, commenced a slow rhythmic tune that gradually built to a crescendo. The contestants made their way from the marquee carrying their longbows with them. The contest was underway. The more-experienced archers flexed their arms and directed their gaze at the not-too-distant bull's-eye. After rubbing chalk onto their hands, they tightened their bows, took aim and fired. Then it was my turn.

As one of only a handful of tourists visiting the contest I was singled out by one of the archers. Why he picked on me first I do not know. Maybe it was because of my flowing white beard or because he had an inkling of my childhood admiration for Robin Hood (or William Tell for that matter). Before I knew it, the bow and arrow were placed in my hands. Having never held a bow or arrow before, combined with the fact that most of the villagers were now watching me, may have accounted for my nervousness. As I tried to regain some element of composure, I flexed the bowstring as if I was a grand master and then concentrated as if my life depended upon it. 'Come on,' I imagined the villagers thinking before at last I released the string. For a moment I held my breath, watching the arrow soar through the air for all of 3 metres before it plummeted to the ground. I was crestfallen. Suppressing my feelings of abject failure, I managed a weak smile as I took in the nods of consolation among the fellow archers before I stood to one side to watch the other contestants. The Indian tourists were full of bravado but ended up making even bigger fools of themselves than I had. Only when all the invitees had had their turn did the real contest continue. Yet, even though the target was a mere 20 metres away, it took the best part of 10 minutes for someone to hit the bull's-eye.

During a lull in the contest I wandered behind the marquee. Some of the younger women were fully occupied in front of a large mirror. Intent on looking their best, they arranged the tilt of their *peraks* and tied up their long black hair in preparation for the dances performed during intervals between the archery contests.

'Do you want a photograph?' one of them asked while her friends giggled like schoolgirls.

Perhaps she had taken pity on me after my pathetic performance at the archery contest. Whatever the reason I was taken aback as I had always been reluctant to photograph 'the locals'. I could not recall how many times I had cringed as I had watched tourists pushing huge camera lenses right into innocent faces without so much as a smile, a please or a thank you. Sometimes they would lighten their conscience by offering a few coins (worth just a few cents) before struggling off laden with camera gear to photograph the next victim. I wondered what would happen if the roles were reversed and a group of Ladakhi tourists descended on their town and attempted to photograph them as they went about their daily business!

The young woman, perhaps in her late twenties, turned towards me. Her dark hair was neatly tied in a bun; her high cheekbones and winning smile would have made any Ladakhi suitor go weak at the knees. Without hesitation she turned her back towards me revealing the full dimensions of the perak resting on her shoulders. It was an opportunity too good to miss and I pressed my shutter rapidly half a dozen times before thanking her. She smiled, and then turned to the mirror. Before she had time to compose herself she giggled as she caught sight of my inane grin in the mirror's reflection. It was time for me to leave.

After a short interlude the next round of the archery contest was underway. As the archers flexed their bowstrings, rivals passed selective comments on their ancestry, their need for glasses and their negligible chances of hitting the bull's-eye. Although the match was fiercely contested it was now conducted in a less competitive spirit. The day finished prematurely when a jug full to the brim with *chang* was passed around. As each glass was filled, toasts were made to anyone who had ever raised a bow and arrow in this life or the next. Wide-eyed grins and raucous laughs were exchanged and all bets were off as the archers sat and relaxed in the warm afternoon sun.

I returned to Leh just in time for the opening polo match. A civilian team from Leh was scheduled to play an army team from the Shyok Valley. The game was well attended. Dignitaries were seated in the covered stand while some 300 to 400 Ladakhi spectators and a sizeable quota of tourists sat on the walls around the perimeter of the field. Here polo is an Everyman's sport, attracting a complete spectrum of Ladakhi society. It is not the exclusive recreation for the rich as it is in Britain, Australia or Argentina.

The game of polo originated not far from Ladakh in the Karakoram kingdoms around Gilgit and Hunza. According to historical accounts the rules were basic and the size of the field and the numbers of players depended on what was available. Gradually the game spread in popularity up the Indus Valley to Kargil and Leh and the valleys to the north including Shyok and Nubra. Regular contests were held throughout the summer.

By the middle of the nineteenth century the British had adopted the game, modifying the rules to ensure fair play and introducing time out—the *chukka*—to ensure a rest time for the ponies. The game was eventually adopted in England before taking off in other parts of the world. With the partition of India and Pakistan in 1947 the game fell into decline in Ladakh. Matches were less frequent, the teams less competitive. Indeed it was only in the 1970s with the presence of the Indian Army that the game enjoyed a revival. The Indian Army were keen supporters of the game while the civilians teams needed little excuse to form a team.

As soon as the match commenced the ball was swept repeatedly from one end of the ground to the other. Each time a team—six players on each side—scored, the musicians would turn on a performance, beating their drums and blowing repeatedly into their horns, while the crowd would respond equally enthusiastically. At first the play seemed evenly poised but, before long, the civilian team fell behind. To the disappointment of the spectators the civilian team was no match for the more disciplined army team. The final score: Army 15, Ladakh civilians 1.

On 7 September and after over a week in Leh I was finally ready to leave. On the morning of my departure I returned for one last time to my lookout just below the King's Palace. The early morning flights from Delhi had already landed and Spituk Monastery at the southern end of the runway was bathed in sunlight. The ridges to the north were speckled in snow, the first fall of the season. I sat contentedly, munching on freshly baked bread from one of the bakeries at the foot of the palace. Looking south on the far side of the Indus, I picked out the trail that I would follow down the valley as I headed off on the final stages on my trek to Kashmir. Since my arrival in Leh, the leaves on the willow trees had begun to turn to gold and I comforted myself with the thought that I would at last be walking into autumn.

## **Traverse to Kashmir**







## **CHAPTER 14**

### **Exploring the Hidden Valleys**

Sitting on the bank alongside the strong, silent current of the Indus I waited while the mules were loaded. As Dilip and the mule attendant from the nearby Spitok village assessed the loads I reflected that I was at last on the home leg. By my calculations I still had eight passes and another forty days to go to reach Kashmir and my houseboat, but it was achievable. After twenty minutes Dilip gave me the signal that they were almost ready and I crossed the bridge over the Indus.

‘Entrance fee is Rs 50,’ an earnest young man employed by the Hemis National Park announced as soon as we had crossed the bridge. ‘And please register.’ Entering my details, I noted I was number 1427 on the list before the official offered me a wad of leaflets outlining the rules and regulations of trekking in the national park. While the clerk was satisfied with the numbers for the season I noted that this was but a fraction of the number of trekkers who, until the recent political unrest, used to visit the Annapurna and Everest regions of Nepal. But then again what was the significance of figures on this wonderfully clear morning.

I commenced a gradual ascent along the dusty track that undulated across a former floodplain on the south bank of the Indus River. After a week in Leh it was good to stretch my legs; at the same time I tried to stretch my mind by recalling the spreadsheet with the day-to-day camping spots for the next few stages of my itinerary.

Two hours after setting out I entered a secluded gorge. At once the temperature fell and a gentle breeze brought relief to the morning’s walk. I sat under the shade of a willow tree and watched as chukar partridge scrambled up the barren hillside. After waiting for Dilip and his party to catch up I adjusted my pace and followed them for the next 5 to 6 kilometres as they crossed and re-crossed a rushing stream that defined our route to the village of Rumbak.

Settling into a rhythm that at times slowed to a standstill I had ample time to assess my new team. Some of my old ‘batteries’ were missing. The day before I had been due to leave Leh, Norboo had received word that his uncle had died and that he was needed to help with the funeral arrangements. Norboo would, however, rejoin me in a few days time when I reached Chiling, a village situated alongside the Zaskar River and linked by road to Leh. This was also where Biro and his five mules would join me, as they too had to go the long way round by road—the only way to cross the Zaskar River at Chiling was by pulley bridge. To carry our loads we had engaged a local man, Sonam Regzin from Spitok. The deal was that Sonam and his four mules would accompany us as far as the pulley bridge opposite Chiling. Judging by his weathered looks Sonam had spent a lifetime wandering the windswept trails of Ladakh. He was a frugal character. Indeed, one of the first things I noticed was the manner in which he would munch on small chunks of week-old bread that he would periodically retrieve from under the voluminous folds of his *chuba*. Compared to Biro—and it is admittedly unfair to compare any mule attendant with Biro—Sonam was quiet, almost reserved, taking everything in his stride. Every hundred metres or so he would stop to inspect the mule’s loads, adjusting a strap or a buckle or shifting a trunk to one side before gently coaxing his mules across yet another stream crossing.

On reaching the head of the gorge we discovered we were the only trekking party camping in the vicinity of Rumbak village. A deserted parachute tent was pitched nearby. The tent had been acquired from the Indian Air Force and nowadays served as a teahouse for trekkers. Each season it was erected by an enterprising villager keen to take advantage of the growing stream of trekkers making their way to the Markha Valley. Tea, biscuits, soft drinks, instant noodles and even the occasional beer were on sale. Visitors also had the opportunity to spread their sleeping bag on a woollen rug on the floor of the tent or head to the village a further kilometre away to spend the night.

Beyond the Indus Valley there are few villages that have not in some way been affected by tourism. While agriculture is the mainstay of the rural economy, cash from tourism is a welcome bonus. However, while some of the villagers travel to Leh to seek employment as trek assistants or to hire their mules to trekking groups, that’s really the extent of tourism’s impact. Go trekking during the harvest in September and an air of normality has already returned to the villages. Only the discarded tin cans and biscuit wrappers serve as a reminder that the short trekking season is almost over.

Yet tourism is often cited as the source of all evil, a demon incarnate enticing this veritable 'Shangri La' from an age of innocence. To the casual observer, tourism provides one of the most visible indicators of change. The visitor is confronted by a multitude of guesthouses and hotels in Leh, the bazaar crammed with tourist agents and handicraft shops, and the emergence of a jeans and T-shirt mentality that was not evident until the first foreign tourists were permitted to visit Ladakh in 1974. In the villages trekkers are often cited as undermining traditional rural values.

There is, of course, some element of truth that before 1974 the Ladakhi people lived relatively harmonious existences free from the pressures associated with the large cities in the rest of the Indian subcontinent. But that is only part of the story. Roads had already been constructed over the passes to Leh, linking it with the markets of northern India. Basic education ensured that the villagers knew a little about life beyond their valleys while some had already left Ladakh to seek employment opportunities in the big cities of Chandigarh and Delhi. Mass communication, although not as intrusive as it is today, provided access to Bollywood movies and life in the big cities on the other side of the world. To single out tourism as the prime cause of Ladakh's contemporary problems is not the case.

Two days out of Leh I took deep, deep breaths as I completed the final switchback to the summit of the Ganda La (4920 metres). It was my first pass crossing in two weeks. Heavy cloud blotted out any view of the Himalaya Range on the southern horizon. Then, for a moment, a shaft of sunlight caught the peak of a jagged ridge in the nearby Zaskar Range; seconds later the sun broke directly below me, lighting up the tiny settlement of Shingo. The barley fields amid the whitewashed settlements added colour to an otherwise drab mountainscape. But before I could unpack my camera the light had gone. It was the last time I would see the sun on this overcast day.

Well before midday we established our camp above the outlying fields of Shingo. It was time for a wander. Before I reached the village I noticed an old lady waving her arm at me. 'Get away!' she seemed to be saying. 'Move away from my wall.' In spite of the warm temperatures her full-length dark-red woollen *chuba* was wrapped closely around her. She wore a tattered sack over her shoulders; an olive-green woollen balaclava was pulled tightly over long strands of grey hair that partly concealed a forehead that had been subject to many years of harsh sunlight. Looking at me with steady eyes that would never need glasses she again motioned with her outstretched arms for me to move.

Then it suddenly dawned on me that I was blocking the path to her small stone enclosure. I stepped back and watched her collecting bundles of grass and tossing them over the wall as fodder for her donkeys. I waved my arms and offered to help, clambering up the hillside and collecting bundles of grass with all the grace of a pregnant yak before throwing it over the wall. After twenty minutes the work was complete. Turning to me she smiled and repeated, '*Julay, Julay,*' before offering me a handful of dried apricots.

I was still doing the best I could to digest the dried apricots the following morning as we made our way down the spectacular gorge to the Markha Valley. The abundance of willow thickets and rose bushes along the watercourse made it hard at times to follow the trail. I was also anxious to avoid getting another willow twig in my knee. About half way down the 6-kilometre gorge I heard the sound of shale moving on a rocky outcrop at least a hundred metres above my vantage point. Looking up, I watched as a herd of *bharal* moved cautiously across the rock face, balancing on the most precarious of footholds. At first light they would have descended to the stream for water before climbing back to feed on the scant vegetation.

It was still early morning when I reached the settlement of Skiu and the Markha valley. Without waiting for Dilip and the horses I headed down valley for a few kilometres to where roadworks were in progress. For years the road had been on the drawing board and it only seemed a matter of time before all the villages were connected by road to Leh. I had once talked to a longtime friend, Rigzin Jora, about this. In a previous incarnation Rigzin had often accompanied me as a guide and mentor during my early days in Ladakh. Nowadays he was a cabinet minister in the Jammu and Kashmir state cabinet. Before that he had been a member of the Ladakh Hill Council, holding the portfolio for roads and rural development. It was he who had toyed with the possibilities of extending red lines across the map and connecting the villages by road to the Indus Valley. On one occasion I had questioned him on whether there was a conflict of interest between their need for roads and the need to make a rupee out of trekking.

'Garry, 95 per cent of all villagers in rural locations are in favour of roads, and this would include those who directly benefit from trekking.'

It was a variant of my stance: that trekkers wanted to visit remote villages, but villagers want roads. The problems of reconciling the development of roads into national parks and its effect on the environment and wildlife species is no less acute in Ladakh than elsewhere in the West

Himalaya.

Heading down the Markha Valley three men were trying with little success to make their tiny beasts of burden get a move on. The donkeys were carrying huge piles of freshly cut willow braches and were on their way to the road head at Chiling. From there the branches would be loaded onto the twice-a-week bus service to Leh before being sold to provide both insulation as well as decoration on the flat roofs of dwellings and guesthouses.

'I am Lobsang Tundup.' The young man dressed in blue jeans and a bright red checked shirt at the rear of the group spoke excellent English. He also swore incessantly as he attempted to get the last donkey to move at a pace that would see them in Leh before Christmas.

'I am on holiday and live in the nearby village of Kaya. I was a trek guide but I am now a development officer with the Ladakh Hill Council.'

I asked him what he thought about the proposed road up the Markha Valley. To my amazement he was one of the 5 per cent not in favour of road development up the valley. Lobsang was concerned about the impact on the valley's ecology. 'The trees on the government land will be cleared by outside contractors.'

But, just as I began to reconsider my conversation with Rinzin, Lobsang acknowledged that he was in a minority. 'Believe me, villagers will welcome the development,' he continued. How long it would take was anyone's guess, though. 'The villagers are still upset with the Hill Council for not replacing the pulley bridge with a proper bridge, even though they have been asking for this ever since the Council was formed ten years ago.'

Pausing to urge his obstinate donkeys along the trail he shrugged his shoulders. 'But what to do!' he concluded with a laugh.

Although the bus was not due until midday, I suspected it would be a close call whether Lobsang's donkeys would make it in time. However, it turned out that even after repacking the bundles of willows onto the pulley bridge, a metal box dangling from overhead wires, there was still no sign of the bus on the opposite side of the Zaskar River. The bus eventually arrived two hours late. By then Norboo had arrived by jeep from Leh just as Biro and his five mules churned up the dust as they made their triumphant arrival at the pulley bridge. All my 'batteries' were ready to go.

Biro was as pleased as ever to be on the go as he led the mules the kilometre or so down the road to Chiling, but Moti was his normal cantankerous self. At first he did his utmost to offload his new baggage before determinedly setting off in the wrong direction. That was too much for Biro who finally brought the recalcitrant mule to order with a mighty kick up the backside.

While the exact origins of many of the villages beyond the Indus Valley would be hard to determine, Chiling is an exception. According to legend the village was established during the reign of Sengge Namgyal in the seventeenth century, when a group of Nepalese craftsmen was commissioned to decorate the Golden Statue of the Materiya Buddha at Shey Palace, about 10 kilometres from Leh. Sengge Namgyal was so pleased with their work he offered them a tract of land alongside the Zaskar River. The men accepted the offer. Nowadays the settlement is known as Chiling, the Ladakhi word for 'outsider', and is an important centre for the supply of copperware. Indeed, there would be few households in Ladakh that do not own a copper pot made in this isolated village. Located about 100 metres above the swirling Zaskar River, it consists of around a dozen households including the home of one of Norboo's old friends, Tsewang Rigzin.

Tsewang had been making copperware all of his working life. Although he claimed to be forty, Tsewang looked far younger. Wandering over he greeted me with a shy almost impish grin. He had been working in the fields with his family since dawn and was keen to take a break. He rubbed his hands on his cotton shirt as he headed past his house to his workshop. Ascending a wooden staircase, we entered a small workshop with a dirt floor and mud walls. There was a large hearth set alongside an opening in the wall facing the fields. Shafts of sunlight filtered through a gap in the ceiling while his tools of trade—his hammers and tongs—were scattered across a low stone bench on the far side of the workshop. In the hearth was a pot full of coals, a blackened teapot and an assortment of copper pots yet to be beaten into shape.

Tsewang produced a copper bowl decorated with delicate silver work that he has just completed. It bore the hallmark of a true craftsman. Most of the copper bowls were made in the winter months when the fields were fallow. However, demand in Leh for copper spoons and knickknacks for tourists kept Tsewang busy even during the autumn. Although Tsewang exerted no pressure on me to purchase a bowl, I was tempted before baulking at the idea of carrying anything more than was really necessary. It was a decision I later regretted, as I'm sure my

daughter would have appreciated a few more mementos of my trek.

Returning to camp, I noticed that a group of European trekkers were setting up their tents. Their crew included a tall gaunt cook who, judging by the *kulla*, a type of skullcap, on his closely shaven head, was from Kashmir. He stared at me and somehow seemed to know me. 'Are you Mr Garry?'

I smiled and in a moment I was locked in a hug with one of my old cooks. I had not seen Mohammed Subhan for at least a decade. 'You look old, Mr Garry.'

'Old is gold,' was the only reply I could muster.

In spite of his smile Subhan looked sad and tired. Like so many Kashmiri people, he had found the going tough since 1990. Over tea I asked after his family and then about the group he was accompanying.

'I think they are from Belgium, but I am not sure. I have not talked much with them.' I was taken aback by his reply. This was Subhan, the life and soul of the trekking parties in Kashmir. It was Subhan who would introduce himself to a group before they had a chance to put on their trekking boots and declare that he was Kashmir's number one cook, a claim his fellow workers hotly disputed. And yet now, after a week on the trail, he still did not know where his group came from! That evening we tried to catch up for lost time and promised to meet up later when I reached Kashmir.

The 1300-metre ascent to the Dung Dung La (4570 metres) was an undeniably long one. By my estimate it would take me a minimum of three to four hours. If hot, the ascent would be unrelenting; if cloudy, the views across the Zaskar Range would be disappointing. I was fortunate. By the time I reached the pass the clouds were lifting and I could take in a familiar landscape, including the source of the Khurna River and the high ridges in the vicinity of the Zalung La that I had crossed three weeks ago. It was a vast, rugged terrain that would take a lifetime to explore.

Of all the mountain passes in Ladakh this is one of the finest. From the crest of the pass mountain light merged with high-altitude desert light. Although it was mid-morning, the ochre and yellow cliff faces were intensified by the darkened sky, while hundreds of metres below, the tiny whitewashed settlement of Sumdo glistened amid the oases of ripening barley fields.

In the early evening the presence of lights flickering in Sumdo provided a reminder that solar panels were now an integral part of the landscape. 'A solar panel, the wiring, the battery and the light bulb cost around Rs15000 (US\$300),' Norboo informed me. 'It is not a small sum, particularly for a villager, although it is subsidised by the government.'

In Ladakh the sun shines for over 300 days a year, making it ideal for solar power. Micro-hydro schemes powered from the irrigation channels are also being introduced in many remote valleys providing a viable alternative to the huge schemes adopted elsewhere in the Himalaya. Norboo's house in Khalsi has had solar panels for the past decade. However, a micro-hydroelectric scheme established around the same time had not been able to cope with the demand and Khalsi was dependent again on a generator supplied by the government to maintain the power supply.

The introduction of alternative technology to Ladakh came at just the right time. Many of the innovations were initiated by the work of the Ladakh Ecological Development Group—LeDeG—a non-profit organisation based in Leh that was founded by a Swedish linguist, Helena Norbege-Hodge. The centre was officially opened in 1984 and has since gone from strength to strength. Focusing on the aspirations of the Ladakhi people it takes into account not only the region's economic wellbeing but also the need to preserve Ladakh's rich cultural identity. In particular, LeDeG provides a forum in which the Ladakhi people can carefully consider their future in the light of tourism and other modern developments. Twenty years on the centre is still flourishing.

Even though I set off early to reach the Konze La (4790 metres) I knew there was little chance of glimpsing the wildlife. The biggest impediment is the marmot, the Himalayan hyrax, with its keen sense of smell and shrill whistle. These furry brown, rabbit-sized creatures are particularly large in this region of the Himalaya. As soon as they pick up an unfamiliar scent, they stand on their hind legs and whistle incessantly, warning the rest of their family and any other wildlife within coo-ee distance before retreating down the nearest burrow. Nonetheless, sometimes you can be lucky and that morning I saw *bharal* foraging just below the pass. Normally I would have made an entry in my notebook and that would be it, but this morning I focused my vision on the crags above the pass, hoping to catch a glimpse of a snow leopard stalking its prey. Perhaps I was just euphoric, a condition not uncommon in these magnificent rarified heights, but I had had my one and only sighting of the elusive cat as I approached the other side of the pass

during an unseasonably early snow fall in 1995.

By early afternoon we had completed the two-hour descent from the pass and were within spitting distance of the village of Hinku. No sooner had we erected our tents than the sky darkened and the rain came lashing down. It was an unfamiliar pattern. Normally the harvest season is marked with clear blue skies but this season the rains had continued well into autumn. Retreating to Dilip's cook tent, Norboo, Biro and I waited for the storm to pass.

As the rain swept down the valley we were unaware that our latest recruit had already gone into the village. Tashi Tundup was a likeable teenager who, together with his five mules, had tagged along with us as he made his way back to Lamayuru. As we later learned, before Tashi had time to take shelter the village contractor had abruptly demanded he pay Rs200 (US\$4) for grazing his and Biro's mules at the campsite. This was a standard fee. The contractor would then donate a percentage towards a village project and keep the rest. However, something had seemed not quite right. The contractor was abrupt, almost angry. Although Tashi appeared young and small for his age he was not totally naive. Fortunately for us, he had stood his ground and asked for a receipt before returning to camp in the driving rain.

When the storm cleared I ventured down to the village. Huge plastic sheets covered the bales of barley while flocks of pigeons and accentors feasted on the seeds from the freshly harvested fields. Yet although the sun had reappeared only a handful of workers had returned to the fields. I was soon to discover why.

Not long after returning to camp I heard the sound of raised voices coming our way. A mob—and that is the only way to describe them—of twelve to fifteen unkempt villagers were approaching our campsite. It was clear from their demeanour that they had been sampling a few bottles of *arak*.

Before Norboo could even get out of his tent he was surrounded by the mob, all raising their arms and shouting excitedly. Even from a distance they reeked of alcohol. 'What the hell is going on?' I wondered.

Clearly the mob wanted some outlandish compensation for our horses that were grazing in the recently harvested fields. Norboo called Tashi to produce the receipts but this in no way placated them. As far as I could see there was no chance of a reasonable discussion. During the melee, one of the group raised his arm to Tashi. I hastily stepped between them and shoved the startled villager back a step or three. By now I was almost beside myself with anger. It was my signal that as an outsider I had had enough and was not intimidated by them.

Then something happened. The mood of the mob changed. Without warning, the anger being vented at us was suddenly redirected towards the contractor and his son. It seemed there had been a long-standing feud between the contractor and some of the villagers, jealous perhaps that he had not paid enough tender money for what was a better than anticipated season. There was also the issue that the contractor had no right to collect money for grazing rights to the nearby fields. Heated words were exchanged between the contractor and one of the more vociferous villagers and then a scuffle broke out. Fortunately, before any blows were exchanged some of the more sober members of the mob pulled the culprits apart. It was a farce and to cap it all they then came over to apologise before dispersing back to the village.

Never in my many visits to Ladakh had I experienced anything like this. When the contractor's son re-appeared the following morning to smooth things over, Norboo gave him a tongue-lashing. 'You treat us like dogs and then expect us to shake hands and forget. I will report both of you to the police in Khalsi.'

An hour later I walked through the village, happy to be on my way.

That evening I talked things over with Norboo. What exactly had we done wrong? In hindsight the mules should not have been let loose in the nearby fields even though the crop had been harvested. But then again where else could the mules have gone? What exactly were we paying for? For the same amount Biro could have bought enough grass to feed the mules for the night. I could only surmise that this village was an exception. Or was it? A few days later I talked the incident over with another Ladakhi guide.

'Don't worry about it. This has happened before in Hinku and also in another nearby village,' he told me. As far as he was concerned the problem was with the police. 'Every time a complaint is made the local policeman cannot intervene for his own safety, so nothing gets done!'

By late afternoon we reached Lamayuru monastery. It marked a halfway point on the Leh to Kargil road. In less than a month I would be in Kashmir.

For even the most jaded traveller the site of the Lamayuru's Assembly Hall perched on a jagged

ridge top is impressive. According to legend, Marpa, the noted tenth-century Buddhist teacher, meditated in a cave above a serene lake whose waters have long since drained into the Indus River. Marpa's cave marked the original site of the monastery and can still be found deep in the precincts of the building. The monastery was originally known as the *Tharpa Ling*, the Place of Freedom. For many centuries it provided a sanctuary for criminals seeking redemption. Nowadays, the monks administer many of the outlying monasteries, including Khalsi, while in recent years the administration has moved the date of its annual festival to early summer in order to attract the tourist dollar.

'Winter was the right time. As a young boy I would look forward to it, while for my family it was a good break when they had less to do.' Norboo was not happy with the move and by the tone of his argument neither was his family or most of the village. 'We were not consulted. Most are busy in the fields. One festival during the summer, at Hemis, is enough.'

Norboo was to say goodbye at Lamayuru. After accompanying me for two months all the way from Manali, he was off to Nepal. We hugged each other, then Norboo smiled and remarked, 'I will see you in Delhi.'

Jumping onto the back of an empty truck he waved again. He would stop at his home at Khalsi for a night or two before flying from Leh to Delhi and then on to Kathmandu to attend a medical course. I would miss him.

Angchuk Nye was my new 'battery'. Stocky, slightly greying at the temples and several years older than Norboo, Angchuk was a consummate trekker. Wearing a blue fleece jacket, olive trekking pants and a bright red baseball cap, he was a seasoned guide who had trekked with me many times before. This time he would accompany me to within a stage or two of Kashmir. He was one of six siblings—one brother and four sisters—and came from Nye, a small village not far from the historic town of Basgo some 50 kilometres west of Leh. After studying at the same local school as Norboo he had completed a mathematics degree at Jammu University. Then he had returned to Leh and taught at the army school for several years before signing up with World Expeditions (India) as a trekking guide.

In many respects Angchuk and Norboo represented a new generation of educated Ladakhi guides. Living for part of the year in Delhi and spending several months on the trail, Angchuk saw his wife and seven-year-old son for only a few months each year. Visits to his home were also limited. His 77-year-old father was cared for by his youngest sister and elder brother. According to Angchuk, his father was very active and still worked in his fields as he had done all his life. Even when Angchuk's mother died three years ago his father had refused Angchuk's offer to arrange for labourers to help, choosing instead to cope as best he could.

The question arises of whether Angchuk's life working away from the home for many months of the year reflects a new trend in Ladakh. To some extent it does. The new generations have access to education, and with it a myriad possibilities beyond the confines of the Indus Valley. However, for many Ladakhi people trading and travelling has always been an accepted way of life. While Angchuk's work as a guide took him to the far corners of Ladakh, this is nothing compared to his father's endeavours. His mother once told him that she only saw his father in the winter. For the rest of the year he was travelling between Ladakh, Baltistan and Tibet. In the spring he would go to the Hunza region near Gilgit, famed for its apricots. He would then take the dried apricots together with supplies of barley to Rudok in Tibet. After several months Angchuk's father would return after purchasing salt, raw wool and a woollen fabric used in the making of horse packs and belts that could be sold for a lucrative profit in the Leh bazaar.

An old man approached our camp at Shila a few hours' walk from Lamayuru. Tashi Stodgois was eighty and walked with a distinct stoop, reflecting years of carrying bundles of wood from the nearby gorge.

'Where are you going?' he asked Angchuk.

'To Kanji,' he replied, pointing out the next stage of our trek. 'Have you been to Kanji?'

Tashi shook his head. His horizons were confined to the nearby gorge and the village of Wanlah a couple of kilometres down the valley. 'I make a trip to Lamayuru once a year and to Leh every other year.' Tashi had never been out of Ladakh.

Sitting outside the cook tent, he watched Dilip preparing lunch. Angchuk invited him to join us, but he declined. 'I have my *tsampa*.' He would mix this with a liberal supply of butter tea.

Tashi's wife had died a couple of years ago and since then Tashi had lived alone, although his son and daughter, who lived in the nearby village of Wanlah, visited him every other day and brought him vegetables and treats.

'How far do you think your grandchildren will travel in their lifetime?' I asked Angchuk.

'Perhaps to many parts of India,' he replied, as Tashi rotated his prayer wheel, content to while away the warm autumn afternoon.

Angchuk was taken aback that Tashi Stodgois lived alone. The extended family system is one of the most hallowed institutions in Ladakh. It is a system ideally suited to a land where cooperation and dependence among and within families has been the mainstay of the economy for countless generations. For the time being it remains by and large intact. I look by comparison at my own family background. My father was one of eleven children brought up in a poor rural community in West England, my mother one of five. I was an only child and by the time I graduated my parents had long since separated. Nowadays my family consists of just my teenage daughter—something that is very hard for most Ladakhi people to comprehend.

While not on the same awesome scale as those in Zaskar, the gorge above Shila is impressive. At times the walls rise a sheer 1000 metres above the riverbed and in places the gorge is so narrow that the sun only penetrates for a few hours a day. The entrance is about a kilometre above Shila and I set off early to visit the hot springs. I was disappointed. Although I was not anticipating a luxuriant flow the springs turned out to be nothing more than a trickle of lukewarm water. Tin cans and garbage were strewn around the dilapidated stone huts and there was an allpervading stench of human turds. For several days a family from Kargil had camped beside the springs, convinced of the medicinal qualities of the water. I decided to head on.

By the time the team caught up there were few signs of human encroachment. Only a handful of rock cairns marked the location of the river crossing. At times the trail ascended above the riverbed to cross the scree slopes; at other times Moti had a field day trying to forge a path through the dense willow thickets. The constant turns in the gorge ensured dramatic changes of light. Even at 11am the lower walls were in deep shadow. It was early afternoon before the gorge widened and we reached a stony, albeit flat campsite.

Not long after dawn our small party was well on our way to the Yogma La (4700 metres) and Kanji village. Reaching the pass the memories came flooding back. When trekking from Kashmir to Ladakh in the 1970s, Kanji had been the first village we visited after crossing the formidable Kanji La (5200 metres). Back then we had the place to ourselves as trekkers were still a novelty. There were no parachute tents or houses offering accommodation. The yak herders in the nearby encampments would offer us yoghurt and *chang*, refusing any offer of payment. Only ten years later the village was on most trekking itineraries. At times two or three groups would camp in the vicinity of the village, each paying camping fees, while inquisitive village children repeated endless chants of 'Give me one bon bon' or 'Give me one pen.' In 1990 it was all over. The unstable political climate in Kashmir had ensured that the trek to Ladakh was no longer viable. Most villagers had little option but to revert to their traditional lifestyles and for some this was hard to accept. Even today memories of the good times still linger and some of the men travel to Leh each summer in the hope of gaining casual trekking employment elsewhere in Ladakh.

Although the tourist dollar may have by-passed Kanji, the villagers have benefited from recent changes. Over the last two years the Ladakh Hill Council have donated solar panels to the households. They have also provided the materials for each family to build a small green house. While the materials consist of nothing more than a series of stone walls covered with heavy plastic sheets, a quick look as we walked past was sufficient to note some fine crops of cabbage, spinach and potatoes.

The day after leaving Kanji I was more than pleased with my pace, which saw me standing atop the Kanji La (5200 metres) only three hours after leaving camp. Even in the days of my prime I could not have done better. The pass defines the main axis of the Zaskar Range with views that extend as far as the huge peaks of the East Karakoram. For the first time in a week there was not a cloud in the sky and although I could not identify the distant peaks I hoped that the endless blue skies would last through autumn.

Approaching the pass, I soon realised we were not alone. In Kanji village we had been told that an army patrol consisting of about twenty soldiers was a day ahead of us. However, a few hours above Kanji village we meet them descending from the base of the pass. They seemed to be all over the place. The young sergeant was keen to warn us of what lay ahead. 'Sir, where are you going?'

'Over the Kanji La to Rangdum.'

'You cannot proceed, the trail is broken.'

'Don't worry, we'll come back if there is a problem.'



‘But it is a very high pass—5200 metres and under snow.’

At this I acknowledged his concern for my welfare before he got down to my personal details.

‘Where is your country?’

‘Australia, hopefully where I left it.’

‘What is your age?’

‘Fifty-five and a bit.’

‘Then you must take rest.’

In spite of my advanced years I decided not to take his advice.

I later discovered that the patrol had been given orders the previous day from their headquarters in Kargil to proceed towards the pass. But the following morning, in true Old King Cole style, the orders were reversed. I wasn’t sure what was going on, but it did leave a nagging thought at the back of my mind that they had access to more information about the conditions on the pass than I did. Simply put, what did they know that we didn’t? Nothing as it turned out.

However, after an exhilarating day crossing the Kanji La our camp was a disappointment. It comprised a tiny, uneven clearing with barely enough room for our tents. There was also little in the way of fodder for the mules. We were glad to get going the next day and had within a few hours crossed a wide river flat to Rangdum monastery, the last outpost of Buddhist culture on my trek.

Rangdum monastery was established in the latter half of the eighteenth century. It is affiliated with the Gelugs-pa order and has close cultural ties with Karsha monastery, which I had visited a few months ago. Even though it is separated from the Zaskar Valley by a pass—the Pentse La—that is under deep snow for six months of the year, the monastery and the nearby villages of Tashi Tungtse and Zuldo are considered an integral part of the Zaskar region.

On this perfect autumnal day the monastery was full of activity as villagers carried bundles of juniper and willow branches into the main courtyard. The collection of fuel was payment in kind for the monks allowing the villagers to graze their animals on the rich grassland in the vicinity of the monastery. How long this tradition would last was anyone’s guess. Solar panels for lighting had already been installed on the roof of the monastery and it would only be a matter of a year or two before these provided heating for the monks during the long and desperately cold winter.

Three years ago the monastery had been struck by a tragedy. Immediately below it is the road that runs from Padum to the Suru Valley and Kargil. In July 2002 a truck travelling from Padum was stopped by a group of monks who had heard a rumour that religious artifacts were being smuggled out of Zaskar. Unbeknown to these monks, some armed Kashmir separatists were travelling in the back of the truck, together with two German tourists. As the monks attempted to search the truck the separatists drew their rifles from under their *feruns* and opened fire. Three monks were shot while the two German tourists also lost their lives.

A year later a foundation stone was laid at the entrance to the monastery and a *chorten* built in commemoration of the three monks. Although the separatists had made their way over the Himalaya into Ladakh this was the first time that either Buddhist monks or foreigners had been involved in any incident of this nature in Ladakh. For the Ladakhi people, both Buddhist and Muslim, it marked a tragic day.

During my rest day at Rangdum I wondered how the monks reconciled this act of violence with their Buddhist teachings? More specifically, I wondered whether their belief in compassion could possibly extend to those responsible for the killings. It was an inappropriate line of questioning to put to the monks for I was just a casual visitor. What is beyond doubt though is that it would have tested the resolve of even the most devout Buddhist monk living in a region of the Himalaya renowned for its tolerance.

After visiting the monastery I sat beside one of the ancient *chortens*. I could see our camp beneath the peaks of the Himalaya Range. However, I would not have to traverse the Himalaya to reach the Islamic villages of the Suru Valley. In a day or two I would simply walk down the valley to cross the cultural divide between Buddhist Ladakh and the mosques and minarets of Little Baltistan. Within a week or so I would also be within striking distance of Kashmir.



## **CHAPTER 15**

### **Where Three Worlds Meet**

From the Lago La the awesome dimensions of Nun (7135 metres) and Kun (7087 metres) can be seen at close quarters. On this clear, windless morning it was a magnificent sight. I felt as if I could almost see a climber on the summit. The peaks also have a special cultural significance found nowhere else in the Himalaya. The valleys to the south of Nun Kun are predominantly Hindu; the valleys to the east across Ladakh, Buddhist, while to the west is Kashmir and an Islamic culture that stretches to the borders of Europe.

As I descended from the Lago La, I observed that the villages in the Suru Valley did not at first appear any different from the rest of Ladakh. The barren hillsides gave way to an oasis of green amid clusters of whitewashed settlements. Yet something was different. The call to prayer from an unseen mosque left no doubt that I was about to enter an Islamic world—my third cultural world—extending to Kargil and to the region of Baltistan, which since 1947 has been spilt between India and Pakistan.

This stage would complete my trek in Ladakh. From the Suru Valley I would continue to the town of Sanko before diverting north to cross another pass—the Umasi La—to Drass. In little over a week I would complete my five-month traverse.

Two hours after leaving the Lago La we reached Pannikhar, one of the largest and most prosperous villages in the Suru Valley. Entering the bazaar, Angchuk, Biro and I together with the five laden mules immediately attracted attention. Trekking groups were a novelty and few would have expected to see a group like ours. In a minute the word was out and a crowd gathered around our mules. Young boys tugged on the straps of my rucksack.

‘Let’s get to the Tourist Bungalow,’ I called to Angchuk.

‘You do not want tea first?’ Angchuk replied, pointing to the *dhaba* in the bazaar.

‘Not this time,’ was my hasty response.

Angchuk looked at me as if I had taken leave on my senses.

Just as we turned to flee a familiar face pushed its way through the crowd. ‘It is Mr Garry.’

There was something familiar about the gangly figure. It was my old friend Gulam Kakpori who I had not seen for fifteen years. I couldn’t believe how little he had changed. He still had a youthful gait and a head of thick black hair even though he was well on his way to forty. Gulam came from one of the most respected trading families in the Suru Valley and had contacts that stretched way beyond Ladakh. Ducking from the barrage of questions about how my life had changed over the last fifteen years, I arranged to meet with him later that morning.

Like the proverbial Pied Piper I was escorted by a group of young adults and inquisitive children along the road leading to the Tourist Bungalow. This would be my home for a couple of nights. Offloading the mules for one last time, I wrapped my arms firmly around Moti’s neck and hugged him goodbye. Although stubborn, his distinctive personality had grown on me over the past few months and I knew in a strange way that I would miss him. It was an action that drew looks of bewilderment from the onlookers.

This was Biro’s final day with us and he was keen to start back. Double-staging, he would be in Padum in five days and close to his home near Manali five or six days after that. After over two months on the trail together, saying goodbye was a bit of an anticlimax. I had already expressed my thanks the previous evening and there was little more to say. It seemed an eternity since we had met up in the first week of July in the orchard at Pulga. After hugs and handshakes Biro headed off with his five faithful mules, intent on reaching Manali in record time.

In the Tourist Office compound Dilip was in seventh heaven, singing a Nepalese tune at the top of his voice as he unpacked his pots and pans in the cleanest kitchen this side of Kathmandu.

‘What’s got into him?’ I asked.

‘Probably counting off the days until he will get back to his new wife,’ Angchuk replied.

Helping myself to a well-earned cuppa, I sat down with Gulam Kakpori and caught up on old times.

'When you first came, I was still very young.' Gulam reminded me of our first meeting. It had been in 1973—a year before Ladakh was officially opened for tourism.

'You and your friends were the first trekkers I had seen,' he continued, referring to the small group of friends who had accompanied me from the UK. 'They did not know what to do with you,' Gulam added, as he explained to Angchuk how our presence in Pannikhar and the next ten days in Kargil had caused 'a problem for the authorities' before we were eventually escorted back to Kashmir.

Over the years I had met up regularly with the Kakpori family. Each season while based on my houseboat, I had led at least one group on a trek from Kashmir to Ladakh. Pannikhar was the halfway point where fresh provisions, usually including a basket full of live chickens, were brought in by truck from Kargil. It was also the turnaround point for our Kashmir horsemen, as from here the Kakpori family used to organise a new team of mules to accompany us for the remainder of the trek. Fortunately the Kakpori family had other business interests outside of trekking that had kept them busy. However, Gulam still remembered the colourful entourage of groups camping for a night at two at Pannikhar as they prepared for their trek through Ladakh.

'God is One.' 'AIDS—avoid unhealthy sex.' These were just some of the signs hanging in the Pannikhar bazaar. While I could see the relevance of the 'God is One' sign, it did not at first dawn on me why a warning for AIDS was particularly relevant in a culture where any thought of extramarital sex would be out of the question.

The Suru Valley together with the rest of Baltistan was converted to Islam in the fifteenth century shortly after Kashmir. Yet unlike Kashmir, where the majority of the faithful are Sunni Muslims, the Suru Valley and Kargil Muslims are mainly Shi-ahs. Pictures of the Ayatollah Khoumeni are pasted on the mud-brick walls along the road, while the region's ties with Iran are maintained with regular visits by clerics from Isfahan.

In contrast to the Buddhist communities in Ladakh this is a man's world. Yet compared to many other Muslim communities, women here may move freely without a male escort. Most wear headscarves rather than the *burkha* in this closely-knit mountain community. I watched as small groups of men gathered in the tea stalls alongside the road while the call to prayer from the mosque in the nearby village of Namsuru echoed across the valley. In the adjacent fields huge magpies fed on the last remnants of the harvest; sacks of barley were stacked in secluded courtyards. Willow trees swayed in the autumn air while hanging glaciers and silent white peaks at the head of the valley provided a constant reminder that we could be almost anywhere in Central Asia.

I sat on a cane chair overlooking a small grassy compound. Deep in thought I did not realise I had company until Mohammed Habib, the *chowkidar*, pulled up a seat beside me. Drawing on his hookah pipe, he looked at me with the intensity of a man beset by worries.

'Last year I came back from working in Kargil'—the largest town about 60 kilometres down the Suru Valley—'I was at the Tourist Bungalow.'

It transpired that Habib had been there during the 'Kargil War' that erupted in June 1999. It was the closest that India and Pakistan had come to war for nearly thirty years and the possibility of it breaking out into a nuclear one had not been out of the question. According to reports, it was only after a shepherd discovered armed separatists from Pakistan on the high ridges to the west of Drass that the Indian authorities had realised something was seriously amiss. It was a rude awakening and it had taken several weeks before the Indian army could deploy its troops in the most strategic areas.

'It was the swoooooosh, swoosh that we feared most.' Habib made a floating movement with his hand to indicate the movement of the bombs heading across the hillside. The bombs were from the Pakistan army on the far side of the International line of control that was within a few kilometres of Kargil.

Habib then locked his eyes on mine as he described how the bombs came closer and closer to the town. 'We thought of running away but didn't.' As it was, the Bungalow was full of media, both domestic and foreigners, covering the conflict and they had needed feeding. The bombing continued for several weeks.

'We lived by the grace of God,' Habib sighed. Listening to his story there was no doubt that Habib fully deserved his recent 'safe' posting near to home. At that moment, his wife called him from over the wall informing him that his lunch was ready.

On the morning of our departure Gulam Kakpori introduced us to our new horsemen. Gulam Mohadi was the younger and more energetic of the two. His assistant Gulam Hussein was far older. At sixty-nine he looked rather like the Artful Dodger in a brown herringbone overcoat that practically draped to the ground. He squatted alongside the baggage, carefully calculating the loads. He then expressed his concern about the weather.

‘What happens if it snows?’ he asked.

‘If it is up to here,’ Angchuk pointed to his ankles, ‘we go on and if it comes to here,’ pointing to his knees, ‘we go back.’

Gulam Hussein was not convinced. He was also wary of why we wanted to walk along the road to Sanko when there was a twice-a-day bus service. After questioning Angchuk, he was none the wiser so decided to take the bus to Sanko later in the day leaving Gulam Mohadi to accompany us with the mules.

Heading down the road from Pannikhar I was keen to be on my own. I knew that I was getting close to Kashmir and wondered if my proposed route over the Umba La could cause an unscheduled delay. In spite of the assurances of my friends in Pannikhar I was still worried that the Indian army patrols would turn me back. If they did it would mean diverting for several days and possibly heading all the way down the Suru Valley to Kargil.

At midday I stopped for lunch—a packet of biscuits, some dried apricots and an apple—and sat on a grassy bank under the shade of a willow tree. Before I knew it I was surrounded by a group of school children. It was Saturday and after attending classes in the morning the rest of their day was free.

‘What is your name?’

‘What is your country?’

‘What is your time?’

The questions were recited non-stop.

Some of the older students were more inquisitive. ‘What are you doing?’ they asked, like Gulam Hussein unable to ascertain why I was walking when there was a twice-a-day bus service. My answer that I was walking to Kashmir was met with blank stares. It was not the first time my explanation had been unconvincing.

In spite of opposition by the more conservative clerics, English is now taught throughout the state of Jammu and Kashmir. Even though schooling is compulsory it is only in the last decade or two that girls have been encouraged to attend school. Gripping at their satchels they pulled their headscarves over their heads, giggling among themselves a few steps behind the boys. For these girls the prospect of extending their education and attending a government college in Kargil was now a distinct possibility. After that there was every chance that they might get a government job or work in a school or hospital, perhaps living for a while in Kargil or Leh.

Completing the 30-kilometre haul to Sanko I spied our artful dodger, Gulam Hussein, holding court in the one and only teahouse. Heads turned as I approached, so I raised my right hand and repeated, ‘*Salaam Alaikum*.’ The locals returned my greeting while staring at my long white beard and somewhat dishevelled appearance. Before I had even taken off my rucksack I was handed a cup of sweet milky tea and a stale coconut biscuit. Hussein pointed up the adjoining valley towards Drass. Drawing his hand fully out of his huge overcoat, he raised all five fingers, which I presumed translated to five minutes to camp.

I presumed wrong, as it was more like 5 kilometres before Dilip, Angchuk and our mule attendants finally offloaded the mules. As we loosened their straps a reception committee from the nearby village emerged from the fields. Before we knew it the children had been told to clear twigs and thorns from our camping spot, the men gathered round to help Dilip erect the kitchen tent, while the women collected buckets of water from the village tap. Our mule men, the two Gulams, were also taken care of, with invitations to spend the night in the village. Before the elders returned to the village Angchuk offered to pay for camping and for the mules to graze in the nearby meadow. They refused his offer, almost as if it was an insult to their hospitality.

‘You are our guests,’ was the reply. I could not help but compare this to our unfortunate ‘welcome’ at the Buddhist village of Hinju a couple of weeks ago.

It was a bleak and overcast day as we set off towards the Umba La to Drass. After a couple of hours we ascended above Umba, the highest village in the valley. A lone soldier beckoned me to

come over. I had anticipated this, knowing that at some point before the pass I would be required to show my passport. Approaching the well-camouflaged army check post, I lifted my right arm to acknowledge the presence of three or four soldiers carrying sten guns. They waved back.

'Yes, you are going to Drass?' the sergeant enquired.

'Yes,' I nodded. While his features were typically Ladakhi, his deep sonorous voice made me wonder where he was from.

'Are you from Ladakh?'

'No, we are all from Tibet,' he replied. I should have guessed; it would be hard to nominate a group of men more suited to this high-altitude posting. As if we had all the time in the world the sergeant invited us into his tent to have tea. Inside the thick, dank-smelling cotton tent I cast my eyes around to the camp bed covered by a plump sleeping bag. Next to the bed was a low table on which a black-and-white photograph of his family—his wife and two small children—together with a few well-thumbed Indian magazines provided what seemed to be his only connection with home.

By now Angchuk had joined me and I was grateful to him for doing his homework the previous day. On reaching Sanko, he had visited the army camp on the edge of town where a young captain from Jammu had assured him that I could cross the Umba La. He had promised Angchuk he would radio ahead. It seemed from our reception that the captain in Drass had kept his word. The only problem was that since I was the first foreigner to cross the pass that year, the sergeant did not have the faintest clue as to which form I should sign. The radio burst into life as messages were relayed concerning what to do with me. At last, after an hour, I was presented with forms to sign in triplicate. With that the sergeant shook my hand firmly and with a sly wink of an eye informed me, 'You may proceed.'

'Proceed' would not be the most accurate description of the next two hours' tortuous climb to the base of the Umba La. The switchbacks across the steep scree slopes made me feel as if I had gained nothing in terms of fitness over the last four months. Angchuk was also finding the going tough as we ascended way above the army camp.

Immersed in low cloud, Angchuk and I were unable to check our progress. Even when the clouds momentarily lifted I was unable to recognise any obvious dip in the 5000-metre ridgeline. We had no choice but to wait for our mule men. 'We could be in for a long wait,' I muttered. An hour later I heard the faint call of Gulam Mohadi cursing the mules. 'They're still someway off,' I remarked to Angchuk, who by this time was sitting on a nearby boulder peering into the horizon.

When our mule men finally reached us they slumped to the ground. Gulam Hussein's face was pale and drawn and I felt guilty that he had been brought out of retirement to accompany us. It seemed like an eternity until he finally got to his feet. Turning to Angchuk he sighed deeply while resting his hands on his knees. Then he took a limp hold of the mule reins and trudged on upwards, mindful that the day was far from over.

An hour later we finally reached the crest of the pass. There was no sense of euphoria. No high fives or handshakes, just the acknowledgement that we could finally get down to camp. I even forgot to record the height of the pass by my altimeter. Through the swirling mist I spotted a tiny oasis of green about 500 metres below us. 'That will do us for the night,' I thought. I had no problem convincing Angchuk and our mule men.

Immediately below the pass the gradient was steep and the going was harder than expected as a thin sheet of ice lay just beneath the scree. Gulam Hussein gripped the tail of the last mule. I was not sure whether this was to steady him or the mule as he looked vaguely into the distance. Angchuk scurried across the slope to help out, gently encouraging the mules to find their footing. It was all too apparent that these mules were more suited to working in the fields than carrying loads over ill-defined passes.

After establishing our camp I tried to gain my bearings. I estimated it would take only a few hours the next morning to reach the village of Drass. By early evening the clouds gave way to a star-speckled sky that marked the onset of a bitterly cold night. Yet in spite of our pleadings it was only with the greatest reluctance that our mule men retired to Dilip's mess tent. As they settled in for the night they remarked that we should get to Drass by midday so could be on their trek home by early afternoon. If they made good time they might even get back to this same camp by nightfall.

Our camp below the Umba La was our coldest night (around -20°C) since setting out from

Uttarkashi. As I emerged from my tent soon after dawn I noticed that the nearby stream was frozen solid. Inside the cook tent Dilip was wearing a balaclava and gloves as he prepared the first brew of the day. Our two intrepid mule men were already out in the elements looking for their mules that had wandered off in the night in search of fodder.

By the time Gulam Mohadi and Gulam Hussein returned they were frozen. Without any formalities they warmed their hands on Dilip's stove. Until now they had not accepted any of our provisions except for some tea and a cupful of sugar. They had even declined to use our pots and pans to prepare their meals of *tsampa* and salt tea. Both were orthodox Shi-ah Muslims. In terms of religious strictures they would have put an obsessive Hindu Brahmin to shame. The previous evening Angchuk had gently questioned them. 'It is cold. We are all human beings, why don't you eat with us?' but they had still declined to do so or eat our food.

The bitterly cold night had changed their minds. Holding his hands as close to the flames as possible without burning them, Gulam Mohadi drooled over our pot full of *thukpa* left over from the previous evening. He then muttered something under his breath. Angchuk nudged me. 'He wants to know if we can spare some of our *thukpa*,' he smiled.

It was a welcome breakthrough and raised our spirits as Dilip carefully ladled out five bowlfuls of steaming hot *thukpa*.

In spite of the hearty breakfast it took more than an hour to load the four mules. By the time we set off a weak sun was covered by drifts of high cloud moving up the valley. It was an ominous sign that bad weather would soon be upon us. An hour later it began to snow and any thoughts of an easy day were forgotten.

As the thick dark cloud billowed up the valley we lost our bearings. It then at last became apparent why Gulam Mohadi had asked Gulam Hussein to accompany us. Gulam Mohadi had never been over the Umba La before so Gulam Hussein was the only one who actually knew the way. Yet even he could not recall how far we had to go down the valley before climbing a side ridge. Wasting energy we continued as best we could, daunted by the multiplicity of goat trails that led nowhere. By now we were cold, miserable, our spirits were falling and our clothes were rapidly being covered in snow. After a futile interchange with his companion Gulam Hussein seemed resigned to spending the rest of his life in this forsaken valley. Taking Angchuk to one side I suggested that we just continue on upwards. I reasoned that at some point we would meet the road to Drass, besides which it would be better than freezing our butts off here.

Early that morning we had seen a scar high across the contours of the mountainside. It marked the extent of a road that was being built to link Drass and Sanko. The development had commenced soon after the Kargil War in 1999, in order to provide a strategic alternative to the road between Drass and Kargil, and had been given priority funding by the Indian government. At least by ascending above the floor of the valley to the road we would not get lost.

It took another unrelenting hour before we reached it. I was at first jubilant. After all, I thought, all we had to do now was follow the road around and down to reach Drass, possibly even by lunchtime. Shaking the snow off my jacket I walked ahead. Then, my heart sank. A sign reading 'Drass 21km' had been painted on a roadside boulder. I had anticipated that we would be much closer. Calculating that we might cover at best 4 kilometres an hour, I realised that meant another five long hours to go. So, shrugging my shoulders, I resigned myself to a long day and plodded on resolutely. Only once did the clouds lift, revealing the ridges and peaks above Drass that had figured prominently in the dispatches during the Kargil War. It was a further couple of hours before I could make out the small town spread along the road linking Kargil and Kashmir.

The thought of stripping out of my sodden clothes and having a hot shower was uppermost in my mind as our bedraggled party finally reached the Drass bazaar. With boots caked in mud we kept our wits about us. Trucks hell bent on reaching Kargil by nightfall lurched from one side of the bazaar to the other, avoiding the pot holes and us by a whisker. It was with relief that we finally turned into the compound of the Hillview Hotel. Checking into room 21, I was thankful to be out of the elements at last.

After offloading the mules Gulam Hussein and Gulam Mohadi's fortunes improved. As soon as they left the hotel compound they met some distant relatives who offered to accommodate them until the storm passed and it was safe for them to return to Pannikhar. They were also pleased that they would be paid a couple of day's bonus to tide them over until the weather cleared. As it happened it cleared the next day!

While our mule attendants settled in, Angchuk was anxious to know when he and Dilip might be on their way. I had arranged for friends from Kashmir to meet me here on 1 October, in two days time. In the interim Angchuk was keen to check whether they might already have left to meet me. Wandering the bazaar he searched without success for a telephone that worked. By

the time he returned to my room he was resigned to having to spend a couple of days in Drass before he could 'hand me over'. He needn't have worried. Less than an hour after he returned, I heard familiar voices in the hotel lobby. My new 'batteries' had arrived.

Angchuk and Dilip's spirits soared. Immediately, they began to pack up the tin trucks and heave kitbags onto the back of a jeep that would take them to Kargil that night. If all went well they would be in Leh by the following evening. It was hard to contain Dilip, who could now tick off the days until he would be back in Delhi with his new wife. After all the trials and tribulations of the trek we barely had a chance to say goodbye. It was rather like arriving at a railway station when you are late and the train is just about to leave. A few hugs and promises to meet up in Delhi and that was it. After over two months on the trail Dilip, with his infectious grin and his constant efforts to keep 'the rice and dhal man' happy, was gone. Heaven only knew when I would sit in his cook tent again.

My trek through Ladakh was over. As I watched the jeep wind its way past the potholes and parked lorries in the bazaar, plans were being made. Rauf Tramboo, a longtime friend and trekking guide; Rashid Sangloo, another good friend and cook; and Kadir, our forever-patient driver, had decided on the next move. While I continued on foot they would transport my gear over the Zoji La—the pass to Kashmir that I would cross the day after next—to the first village at Sonamarg. Everything, it seemed, was going to plan.





## **CHAPTER 16**

### **A Short Walk Down the Sindh Valley**

Nothing can prepare you for your first glimpse of Kashmir. From the Zoji La (3450 metres) it took time to adjust to the verdant, forested valleys and alpine peaks—Switzerland but on Himalayan proportions—after having traversed for two months across the stark landscape of Ladakh. Immediately to the south, the daily convoy of trucks looked almost like children’s dinky toys as they slowly negotiated the switchbacks leading to the floor of the Sindh Valley some 500 metres below. The need for a road linking Ladakh to Kashmir and the rest of India became a high priority after the Indo-Pakistan partition in 1947, and the result carved out of the mountainside is an engineering feat of the highest order.

I had had the road almost to myself since reaching the Zoji La. At a small Hindu temple on the far side of the pass an Indian soldier wrapped in a trench coat offered me *prasad*, a religious offering, placing icing sugar in the palm of my hand. He seemed barely out of his teens and nervously avoided my gaze. When at last he turned away he pulled the collar of his trench coat over his shoulders before lighting some incense sticks and muttering prayers under his breath in the icy cold air.

On the far side of the upper Sindh Valley is the pilgrim trail that leads to the famous Amarnath Cave. Each year something in the order of 30,000 Hindu pilgrims set off to reach the cave set deep in an alpine valley. Their goal is to pay homage to an impressive ice statue, a stalagmite in the cave that symbolises the *lingam* of Lord Shiva. The cave is particularly auspicious, as it is located not far from the source of one of the tributaries of the Sindh River that flows into the Jhelum River and eventually into the sacred Indus.

An hour later my lungs were full of alpine air as I left the highway and headed down a steep, grassy embankment to the pilgrim trail. By now the pilgrimage season was over and I had the track to myself as I made my way down to Sonamarg, the highest village in the Sindh Valley. After seven long years it was so good to be back. The distinctive smell of the conifers, the call of enormous black crows hovering above the meadows, and the familiar sound of shepherds tending their flocks brought back memories of my first innocent visit to Kashmir.

Around mid-morning I approached a series of makeshift wooden huts alongside the Srinagar to Leh road. Sonamarg is not the most picturesque village in Kashmir. In fact, in such a magnificent setting a bulldozer might be the perfect way to improve the charm of this large, sprawling, shanty village.

Rauf Tramboo was waiting for me at the first tea stall. Lanky, affable and a highly experienced trek guide and longtime friend, Rauf was my Kashmir ‘Mr Fixit’. We had met up in May when I was in Delhi, where he runs a small adventure travel business. Rauf had flown from Delhi to Kashmir a few days previously and had planned to accompany me on the trek. Or at least, that had been the plan until now. Judging by the expression on Rauf’s face, there was something wrong.

‘Garry, we need to see the army,’ was how Rauf decided to break the news to me.

‘What for?’ I asked.

Knowing that I wanted a straight answer, Rauf shrugged his shoulders nervously before finally getting to the point. ‘There is a rumour that the army have closed off the route to Gangabal.’

‘Who told you this?’ I asked, anxious to identify the source of the rumour.

‘The Tourist Officer,’ Rauf replied, indicating with a nod the Tourist Bungalow on the far side of the road where the Jammu and Kashmir tourist department had an office. ‘I checked with the Tourist Officer who advised me to talk to the police who said that it was a matter for the army.’ Rauf expanded on what he had been dreading to tell me.

Although a small but steady flow of foreigners had already trekked to Gangabal Lake that season, permission ultimately rested with the army. If they decided for whatever reason to stop anyone—be it local villagers or trekkers—then they could do so.

Locked in deep thought, I walked with Rauf half a kilometre or so down the bitumen road to the

army compound. I needed a break, I told myself. I needed my Wind Horse to be high. I had come all this way practically without a hitch, and now this. Bracing myself, I realised that whatever the truth behind the rumours I would soon know one way or another whether I could complete the trek I had set my heart on ever since leaving Gangotri in May.

As Rauf and I approached the entrance to the compound an Indian soldier looked me over. I had tucked the red cravat that I normally use to keep the sun off my neck inside my cotton shirt. This, together with my flourishing white beard and sun-tanned face, gave me a look bordering on respectable. With a swagger and a well-trimmed moustache I could almost have been a long-retired major who had been out for a walk in the hills for a month or more. Whatever delusions I had regarding my appearance, it seemed to do the trick. Within seconds of presenting my business card—I had always known that would come in handy sometime—the word was passed down the line that an *angrezi* wanted to meet the commanding officer.

‘Come,’ said the Indian soldier motioning for me to enter the wooden gate.

‘You go,’ said Rauf, ‘they will not allow Kashmiris inside.’ He was right.

‘No permission,’ barked the Indian soldier in a manner becoming of any subordinate rank who had little chance of promotion.

At a quick march I entered the compound where the Indian major was doing his best to relay orders down a faulty phone. Unlike me he did look the part with a carefully trimmed moustache and well-pressed uniform. Greeting me with a firm handshake he instructed his orderly to bring tea. As soon as I sat down he embarked on all number of tangents including enquiring about the state of my health, my occupation and the chances of him living for a while in Australia before finally getting down to business. When I was at last able to pop the question, I received news I did not want to hear.

‘There has been a recent sighting of militant activity on that side,’ the major told me, pointing towards Gangabal before adding, ‘We advise for your own safety not to go.’

It was a polite request that I could not ignore. To do otherwise would have been foolhardy and I had no intention of taking a chance or putting my own or anyone else’s safety on the line. Whether I liked it or not I had to accept that the army had a job to do.

So that was it. After five months of trekking it seemed I would not be able to reach Gangabal Lake after all, at least not this year. I wondered later whether the army had decided to close the area due to the recent snowfalls and had used the militant sighting to fob me off. Whatever the truth, the fact was that I could not continue to the sacred lake.

I said little to Rauf as we commenced our walk to our campsite about 2 kilometres further down the Sindh Valley. I was struggling to accept that my plans—which had taken years to put together—were not going to eventuate. Although I did have an alternative plan until now I hadn’t given it any serious consideration. However, by the time Rauf and I reached the alpine glade close to the Thajiwas Glacier my mind was racing as I considered my options.

My two other Kashmir companions who had also met me in Drass had gone ahead to establish camp. Rashid Sangloo was the first to offer a handshake. He was a longtime friend and cook who had accompanied me on many treks. Kadir, our silver-haired driver, had managed to manoeuvre his jeep as close to the camp as possible. By the looks on their faces they had already guessed the outcome of my meeting.

‘What do you think?’ I asked Rauf.

‘Garry, it is up to you,’ was the predictable reply. With that I got down to business. I decided that I would spend a few days camping at Thajiwas while Rauf and Kadir would drive back to Srinagar that afternoon. Kadir would return with the jeep in three days’ time to pick up Rashid and my baggage, leaving me free to walk down the Sindh Valley.

Many years ago I had acquired a copy of the fifteenth edition of the *Tourist Guide to Kashmir, Skardo etc* written by longtime Kashmir resident Dr Earnest Neve, and published in Lahore in 1933. The guide outlined all the major routes in and out of Kashmir including four stages from Sonamarg to Srinagar. Seventy years ago it would have been a delightful trek and I wanted to savour something of that bygone era, avoiding the highway whenever possible. By my calculations it would take me three days (in fact it took me two) to complete the walk to Srinagar onto my long-forsaken houseboat in the Kashmir Valley. It was not my favoured option but what choice did I have? I resolved there and then that I would return to Kashmir the following year and complete the trek to Gangabal Lake.

As soon as Rauf and Kadir departed, Rashid set about raising my spirits. Food was the order of

the day and in this he excelled. Rashid had first trekked with me over twenty years ago and since the political unrest in Kashmir in 1990 had regularly travelled to Nepal to train Nepalese cooks employed by a trekking company in Kathmandu. Now in his early forties he was married with three children—two sons and a daughter—whom he did not see for months at a time. In May he had returned to Nepal. This time to Thyangboche monastery, a few stages below the Everest Base Camp, where on the night of 29 May 2003 he had supervised the dinner marking the fiftieth anniversary of the first ascent, hosted by Sir Edmund Hillary's son, Peter. Nearly 200 trekkers had attended the banquet during which there had been a live telephone link-up to an event hosted in Sydney by my fellow directors of the Australian Himalayan Foundation.

'You would not believe it,' Rashid said. 'Seven goats and a buffalo were dispatched into the pot, over a 100 kilograms of chicken was flown by helicopter from Kathmandu.'

It had certainly been an evening to remember. However, while the guests had dined on buffalo steak, kebabs and succulent chicken curry washed down with non-vintage rum and a few beers, I had not gone short either. On that night I had camped in snow below the Yamunotri Pass and had enjoyed a modest banquet of rice and dhal before settling into my sleeping bag soon after sunset.

As we talked, the half moon rose above the ridges behind Sonamarg, the trees casting deep shadows across the meadows. In the half-light we talked of Rashid's family. His eldest son was fifteen years old and had never known Kashmir in peaceful times.

'Does he ever ask you about the good times?'

'Often. It is difficult for him to imagine life without the presence of soldiers and curfews.'

Although I could not contain my disappointment at not being able to trek to Gangabal, I was still glad to be back in Kashmir. After two months above 3500 metres my lungs soaked up the rich alpine air. 'Thank God I don't have Almas with me,' I thought. He would have insisted that we climb every nearby ridge and glacier. Now I was just happy to amble.

Early the following morning a thick frost extended across the meadows to the snout of the Thajiwas Glacier. Smoke from the alpine encampments lingered in the air as the shepherds prepared their tea. Their huts were neatly camouflaged on the hillside and guarded by snarling dogs. At this time of year only a few of the men remained. The rest of the families had already set off on their autumn migration, taking their herds of lumbering buffalo back down to the Kashmir Valley.

Lammergeiers with immense wingspans hovered on boulders, intent on removing bones from the carcass of a mule that had died a few days ago. Black crows bounded across the smooth green meadow in anticipation of a second picking. I climbed a scree slope above the valley floor and looked towards the huge broken chunks of ice that formed the upper elevations of the tumbling glacier. The leaves on the birch trees had turned gold. The rich autumnal colours reminded me that in a few weeks I would be back in Australia where the spring snows would be melting on the higher elevations of the Snowy Mountains. My mind turned to Biro. I estimated he would be well beyond Ladakh and within a stage or two of his home in the Kullu Valley.

Towards midday a handful of Indian tourists passed our camp riding on ponies to Thajiwas Glacier. Horsemen they were not; leaning back in their saddles they clung to the reins for all they were worth. The ponies rarely broke into a canter except when the Kashmir pony attendants felt the need to quicken the pace. Occasionally an attendant would race forward and give a pony an almighty whack if it lingered by the side of the trail. For the rest of the time they chatted among their friends, content to pass the time of day.

By 4pm Sonamarg was relatively peaceful. The truck and army convoys had left—either to the Kashmir Valley or over the Zoji La to Drass and Ladakh. The Indian tourists had also departed leaving the pony men to discuss their day. Seeing me, they wondered perhaps whether there was a chance of further work.

'*Sahib*, you need riding pony?' they asked as they approached, wearing the long woollen cloaks—the *ferun*—that are worn from dawn to dusk by the Kashmiri men.

'No,' I smiled.

'Tomorrow?'

'Maybe,' I replied, as I tilted my head to one side in an almost familiar greeting.

In the nearby army camp, soldiers played volleyball to relieve the monotony of their duties. Others wandered in groups of twos and threes through the bazaar, their thoughts on their

families and homes.

'Sir, my God is your God,' was how the conversation had started, the soldier clearly keen to introduce his thoughts on the Supreme Being. 'Sir, I tell you all God is the same.'

'What about Allah?' I replied.

'Yes sir, he is also the same God.'

'Does that make you and the soldiers from Pakistan brothers?'

'Why not?' he answered.

This had been the gist of a conversation when I first visited Sonamarg in September 1970. I had stayed at the Tourist Bungalow for a few nights. At the time Ladakh was off limits to foreigners so I had been content to wander in the vicinity of the upper Sindh Valley. That was where I had met the Bengali soldier pre-occupied with his thoughts on God. Later, I had written to my mother about the conversation. For the soldier, war was a matter of politics and, according to him, it was the Pakistani politicians who were to blame. The fact that Pakistan had for long been under the rule of the army generals did not figure in his argument.

After leaving Kashmir I had thought again about that soldier, for in a little over a year India and Pakistan had once again been at war. I wondered how my friend had fared taking up arms against his brothers.

Setting off well before sunrise the next day I commenced the last stages of my five-month trek. I was aware that I had 70 kilometres ahead of me. Nagin Lake, where my houseboat was moored, was about 9 kilometres this side of Srinagar, and I wanted to get as much distance behind me before the daily convoy of trucks from Drass began to pass. Although I set a fast pace it did not take long before brightly painted trucks sped past, creating thick clouds of yellow dust (I consoled myself with the thought that it was at least Kashmir dust) as they completed the final stage of their weekly Trans-Himalayan truck *rally* from Ladakh.

At times when there were no trucks in sight I tried to regain a sense of what the valley would have been like when Earnest Neve wrote his guidebook. I wandered past rows of stone houses with thatched roofs set amid cornfields that stretched along the banks of the Sindh River. High above me conifer forests gave way to tiny meadows leading to ridges covered in a sprinkling of autumn snow. At other times the local traffic created a welcome diversion. Local buses with 'Drive to Paradise' signs stopped to pick up passengers. A truck halted as a villager made a deal with the driver to take his sheep to market. A young shepherd minded his flock while his dog cowered by the side of the road as a cyclist wobbled past.

Children called out, 'Hello *angrezi*,' while busily throwing stones to dislodge chestnuts from ancient trees (giving rise to thoughts of my childhood days in England spent playing 'conkers'). Adults greeted me with *Salaams* and smiles. In the roadside *dhabas* tiny unleavened rolls were served with a thick blend of *nun chai*—the local salt tea. A cricket match was underway (it was after all Sunday). Cattle rested in a sundrenched courtyard and hens scurried across the road, while men glanced suspiciously at me as they passed the hookah pipe.

Every other truck driver stopped to offer me a lift. I thanked them but continued as if it was the most natural thing in the world to walk in my heavy boots down a main road devoid of shade and comfort.

I planned to stay overnight at a Tourist Rest House about 35 kilometres below Sonamarg and only about 36 kilometres from Nagin Lake. With an early start I calculated that I would reach my houseboat the next day, a day ahead of schedule. Rashid had gone ahead in the jeep and had waited every few kilometres to check on my progress. 'Are you going to walk all night?' he had joked on seeing the determined look on my face.

That afternoon a group of youths in their late teens visited our camp. Without so much as a 'Salaam', their spokesman, a slender youth wearing a black leather jacket commenced his interrogation.

'Sir, what is your good name?'

'Why are you here?'

'What is your country?'

'Why are you walking?'

'Where have you come from?'

I was tired and unresponsive and greeted him with a blank stare. After walking over 30 kilometres that morning I just wanted to be left on my own. There followed an awkward silence before the youth shrugged his shoulders and motioned to his friends to leave. I watched them slip around to the cook tent pitched on the far side of the Rest House, where, judging by the pace of the conversation Rashid would have relished the opportunity to give the group a rundown of my trek and the pitfalls of my personality.

Resting on the concrete steps of the Rest House I scolded myself for being so uncommunicative. It would have been unlikely that any of the group would have had an opportunity to meet foreigners before, even grumpy old ones like me. They would have known nothing of Kashmir without the Indian army, the militants and the presence of the gun.

Just before dawn I woke to the call to prayer from a nearby mosque. Today was the day, I reminded myself, that I would complete my trek. For the first time in seven years I would sleep on my houseboat. I would be able perhaps to ring my daughter. As I dressed and packed my rucksack I was aware that this was the last day I would wear my boots or a shirt that by rights should have been consigned to the bin months ago. In fine spirits I gulped down a cup of tea and a bowl of porridge; I was anxious to be on the road before dawn.

As I headed down the road in the half-light a patrol of about a dozen Indo-Tibetan Border Police approached me. 'Where are you going?'

I was in no mood to be stopped but saw by the look of the police sergeant that a few questions needed to be answered.

'You mean why am I walking?' I replied in a nonchalant manner that could have sent me to the gallows in a former era.

The sergeant narrowed his eyes.

'You have been to Amarnath?' He asked.

'Yes,' I smiled 'I am a pilgrim'.

The sergeant slowly nodded to himself, reluctantly accepting that while I was not quite telling the truth, I was nonetheless harmless.

There was no shortage of police patrols on the road that day, but I was stopped only once. 'Please show me your passport,' the policeman asked, although not actually brimming with confidence as to why he needed to stop this *angrezi* who was walking without any apparent purpose.

I held my passport upside down to show him I came from Australia.

He cocked his head to one side like an inquisitive parrot before waving me on without even looking in my rucksack.

Quickening my pace I passed Kangan, the largest village in the Sindh Valley. Trucks were being loaded with crates of apples that would reach the markets of Srinagar later in the day. I took off my rain jacket and loosened the buttons on my cotton shirt. Even on this bright autumnal day it took me time to adjust to the humidity and to the drop in elevation. I reminded myself that this was my first time below 2000 metres since leaving the Kullu Valley.

Beyond Kangan the forested ridges tapered off and the Sindh Valley broadened. Before me acres of rice were ripe for harvest and villagers were busy cutting and threshing the grain.

About 5 kilometres before the town of Ganderbal I was tempted by the offer of a lift on a steamroller: 'Jump on sir, I am going to Ganderbal,' the driver suggested, as if catching a steamroller was as natural as jumping on a bus. The steamroller and I had been travelling at about the same speed for the last hour or so and the driver was more than aware of my presence. Given that this was the first offer of a lift on a steamroller I had had since leaving Uttarkashi I considered it carefully. In the end I decided to walk on. Quickening my pace, it was neck and neck for a time until the steamroller literally ran out of steam and I was left to make the winning burst into Ganderbal.

I was only about 10 kilometres short of Nagin Lake when Kadir and Rashid finally caught up. They had had an easy morning taking the jeep off the main road to visit friends and distant cousins. But now I was on home territory. This section of the road brought back fond memories of when I would cycle deep into the countryside during my first stay in Kashmir in 1970.

On the last few kilometres I passed the famous Hazratbal mosque overlooking the vast expanse of Dal Lake. On the far side of the road was the University of Kashmir campus. Walking beneath huge chinar trees I passed high brick walls enclosing substantial houses of the well-to-do. Ahead I recognised the row of shops on the opposite side of Nagin Lake. I had imagined these moments and how I would feel ever since leaving Gangotri in May. It was hard to believe that my trek was almost over. It did not seem so long ago that I had shared my camp with Indradev Panda whom I had met while camping above the source of the Ganges.

Taking stock of my experiences I realised that I had discovered no god or guru but neither had I been searching for one. In fact, the more I thought about it, the more I realised I still didn't have a clue about the purpose of my life, the afterlife or anyone else's life for that matter. Perhaps I was a little wiser. Certainly I was fitter than I had ever been since leaving school. There were of course times when I experienced pangs of loneliness but these were balanced by feelings of elation—at the break of day, on top of a pass, or when sitting on a tin trunk glass in hand as I waited for Jeet to prepare the evening meal. The more I thought about it the more I felt grateful—fortunate perhaps not to have had a day's sickness on the trek and no injury apart from the twig embedded in my knee in Ladakh. Nor had there been any delays waiting for porters, permits or food supplies. The only 'hitch' was that I would have to return to Kashmir the following year to complete the final stage of my trek—and that was hardly an unwelcome prospect.

I felt mildly elated. Nothing more. The satisfaction of completing the trek and the need to slowly re-engage with life would not figure until weeks after I had returned home. For the time being I looked forward to a few extra days—a complete week as it turned out—staying on the houseboats before flying back to Delhi.

At last I turned down the shady lane leading to the houseboats moored on Nagin Lake. I tightened the straps on my rucksack and adjusted the collar of my shirt, anxious to show my friends that I was no worse for wear after months in the Himalaya. I recognised familiar faces gathering on the small lawn behind the houseboats. The Badyari welcoming committee was out in full force. Before I could take off my rucksack I was hugged by Gulam Badyari, a close friend and the eldest son of the houseboat family. It was then the turn of the patriarch, Gulam's father, and two of Gulam's brothers before I was confronted by an assortment of relatives and well wishers.

'*Shabash, Shabash!*' 'Welcome home.' 'Good trek.' At first I was a little taken aback by my reception. It was like one of those family reunions where long-lost cousins appear unexpectedly. Before I knew it I was hugged by many whom I had never seen before or perhaps had seen before but did not recognise! The Badyari family were of course genuinely pleased to see me. Others seemed to have adopted an air of expectation about my homecoming as if they were to be presented with priceless mementos that Raja Weare had gathered from the remotest corners of the Himalaya.

'Any room on the houseboat?' I enquired when all the handshakes and the hugs were at last completed.

'Give us your money first,' Gulam Badyari joked as he made to go through my pockets. At that moment a bottle of Indian beer appeared on a tray covered in a pristine white serviette. Dispensing with ceremony I drank straight from the bottle.

As I sat down all eyes focused on my scrawny physique. My weathered face was also given the once over as they strove to outdo each other with one liners. I did my best to come up with a suitable retort.

During a lull in the conversation matters were raised that the gathering would have dwelt on well before they spotted me coming up the lane. 'When are you going to bring your groups back to Kashmir?' they asked, as they tried to ascertain the likelihood of business for the next year. I shrugged my shoulders repeating, '*Inshallah*'—if Allah wishes. It was an all male gathering. I would meet Gulam's wife and daughters later when I visited the family house across the road.

After what seemed like an eternity I finally heard the words I had been longing for.

'Hot water ready.'

With that I lost no time in getting to my feet. After shaking the hands again of the entire 'welcoming committee' I prepared to leave. I had already been informed that my own houseboat, moored half a kilometre away was not ready. Yet for the time being nothing really mattered, except for a rest and hot shower and possibly another ice cold beer. Heaving my rucksack onto my shoulders for one last time I headed down the gangplank and onto one of the grand five-star houseboats owned by the Badyari family.

That evening I declined a chicken curry, preferring instead my normal banquet of rice, dhal and curried vegetables. This time the food was served on a hand-carved walnut table in the dining room of a luxurious houseboat. After five months on the trail I was home.





## **CHAPTER 17**

### **New Maharajah's Palace**

'Your boat needs re-caulking.'

In houseboat jargon this translated to, 'Your boat is about to sink if the hull is not repaired soon.' Not that it would have sunk much, as it sat upon deep layers of mud alongside the banks of Nagin Lake. Nonetheless it could be a problem.

Houseboats had been the place to stay when visiting Kashmir for well over a century. By the 1880s the British visiting Kashmir had come up with an ingenious solution to circumvent the Maharajah's law that prevented foreigners from owning land in the valley. They took to the water, adapting the narrow barges—the *dungas*—that plied the Jhelum into something resembling the spacious style of those houseboats moored on the upper reaches of the Thames. It was a tradition that was popularised by the turn of the century, with the houseboats being moored along the Jhelum River a few kilometres upstream from the ancient city of Srinagar. This was conveniently close to the British Residency, the Post Office, and the outfitters who ensured that sojourns into the mountains were conducted in the most comfortable manner.

Although I had slept on the five-star, four-bedroom boat *India Palace* the night before, the next morning I was anxious to visit my own boat moored a few hundred metres away. *New Maharajah's Palace* had been the name of the boat way before it became my home in the 1980s. My decision to stay on a houseboat was to some extent a matter of convenience. As the groups stayed on the houseboats before and after a trek it seemed logical that I should do likewise. Of course I needed my privacy and a space for my office—normally a spare bedroom—so as business picked up the Badyari family selected a boat suitable to my needs and budget.

In comparison to the deluxe five-star houseboats *New Maharajah's Palace* was of more modest proportions. It was no more than 20 metres long and 5 metres wide with two bedrooms, a galley, and a combined dining and living room that led onto a front porch with spring seats set on a wooden bench. There was also an open wooden upper deck from where I could watch the day-to-day life on the lake.

After being given a graphic description of the state of the hull—'it needs the re-caulking' was repeated—I headed down the gangplank. At first my face dropped, taken aback by all the signs of neglect since leaving in 1990. My furniture was covered in dustsheets, cobwebs covered the windows and the musty smell was a sure sign that the doors leading out to the lake had not been opened for many seasons. It was like rediscovering a long-abandoned cottage deep in the countryside full of memories of long lost summers. But that was where my rediscovery ended. I did not have the time, money or inclination to even attempt to restore my houseboat to something of its former glory. That would have to wait for another year.

Returning to *India Palace* I resolved to make the most of my week in Kashmir. Although the Badyari family owned half a dozen houseboats, *India Palace* was their flagship: a houseboat that would have delighted foreign travellers in the days before 1990. Now it was empty and the age of some of the magazines onboard told their own story. The entries in the boat's logbook testifying to the legendary hospitality had almost come to a halt during the years of political unrest.

Gulam Badyari's youngest son Ajaz, looked after the boat. Barely out of his teens, tall, wafer-thin and with a disarming smile, he was keen to learn the ropes. Although possessing his father's charm he was polite to the point of being reserved: a trait that I later attributed to his awareness that he was never far from the watchful eye of his father. He served the meals, checked the supply of hot water and brought endless pots of tea to help me settle into a lifestyle that I had almost forgotten.

The Badyari family had made a by no means insignificant amount of money in the years before 1990 and nowadays lived in a substantial house about five minutes' walk from Nagin Lake. Each morning they would wander to the well-kept garden complete with herbaceous borders and trim lawn, idly passing gossip while devising ingenious ways to attract more customers onto their deluxe houseboats. When the phone rang one of them would spring into action, almost breaking into a run to their office, 'the Greenhouse'—a shanty plywood construction painted green—where the phone was located.

You would have to have been deaf not to hear what was going on. Frantic calls were made by foreign travellers in Delhi anxious to get the best possible deals. Houseboat rates were quoted and lowered. You could almost hear the voices bargaining on the other end of the telephone line to secure what was a ridiculously well-priced holiday.

‘This is my best price,’ a Badyari family member would repeat before confirming, ‘Yes, we include three meals a day. Yes, we have video and TV. Yes we can include *shikara* rides.’

For those who wished to pay the full rate set by the state government (Rs2500, US\$50 a night) there was no problem, for the other 95 per cent of travellers a bargain had to be struck.

Behind ‘the Greenhouse’ was the cook hut, where Farooq and his assistant Bilaul spent the day preparing meals for the guests. Farooq was not impressed with me. While most of the houseboat occupants would fantasise about the food on offer, all I wanted was rice, dhal and vegetables. As far as Farooq was concerned this was tantamount to an insult. In particular he dreamed of preparing a Kashmir banquet, the *Wazwan*, with a range of succulent mutton dishes—kebabs, *gustabas*, *ristas* and *roghan josh*—served in such quantities that it would feed me and half the population living on the lake for days.

An hour before dawn the *azan* would resound across the tranquil waters of the lake. It was a comforting, familiar sound. In response, I would tuck myself deep into the layers of blankets, mindful that I did not have to get up and pack my sleeping bag. Indeed, I had little inclination to move anywhere in the first day or two. I even abandoned my walking routine.

Islam had come gently to the Kashmir Valley in the fourteenth century following the gradual decline of the once powerful Hindu rulers. There had been no resorting to force. A century later, during the reign of King Zain ul Abidin, Kashmir’s now famous handicrafts, carpets, papier-mâché and shawls, were introduced to the valley by merchants and travellers from Central Asia. It was a cultural tradition revised again during the time of the Moghul emperors and later once more by the British travellers at the turn of the twentieth century. Today the result was encapsulated in the interior décor of India Palace. The intricately carved woodwork, the thick red carpets, the comfortable hand-sown sofas, the walnut side tables, and a writing desk with drawers full of well-worn Time magazines. The papier-mâché light stands, the chandeliers and full-length embroidered curtains, and an array of mementos—including a tea towel decorated with a map of Australia that had been given pride of place above the writing desk.

As I slid open the doors at the front end of the boat I heard the tranquil waters of the lake gently lapping against the hull. The first rays of the sun were already touching the ramparts of the Hari Parbat, the Sikh fort built during the first half of the nineteenth century. On the horizon were the 5000-metre peaks of the Pir Panjal, the glistening snow providing a reminder that I was not too far from the Himalaya.

‘You want flowers?’ It was the unmistakable call from Mr Marvellous, the Flower Man. He was, as always, the first hawker for the day, and knew me from way back. In spite of my reluctance to purchase his blooms Mr Marvellous never gave up. His patter was relentless. ‘My flowers are your flowers. My boat is your boat. They are a gift, you pay me a little something later.’

He would go on in a singsong voice, his impish face grinning from ear to ear; his white *kulla* pulled down tightly across his forehead.

‘Tomorrow?’ he finally inquired. I nodded, as Mr Marvellous paddled away to nearby boats to chance his luck with any new arrivals.

Most of the hawkers were missing, however. I had not seen the Chocolate Man, the Fruit Man, the Barber, the Tailor and all the other mischievous characters that had made life so memorable during the time I had lived on my houseboat. Some were now plying the marginally more lucrative waters of the nearby Dal Lake while others had been forced to seek alternative employment as the political situation deteriorated.

Throughout the day brightly coloured kingfishers perched on the mooring lines securing the houseboat to the bank. For minutes at a time they would remain motionless, before diving into the shallow waters to catch the tiny fish that thrived in the luxuriant weeds just below the surface. Mynah birds flitted from one boat to the next in search of crumbs, the youngsters dive-bombing and chasing each other as they celebrated a fine autumn day.

In the early afternoon Gulam Nabi was having forty winks on his *shikara*, the Kashmir equivalent of the gondola. *Sea Master* was his pride and joy—a name derived from a lifetime of paddling the high seas of Nagin Lake. Gulam’s *shikara* was painted in bright red and yellow with a canvas canopy and full spring cushions that allowed tourists to stretch out and luxuriate. For guests, a ride on his *shikara* was all part of the houseboat experience. For Rs100 (US\$2)

and the prospect of a healthy tip he would paddle them across Nagin Lake or to the early morning vegetable market. In the evening many a romance would blossom as couples relaxed on the soft cushioned seats on a moonlit *shikara* ride.

At dusk I watched handicraft vendors seated in less opulent *shikaras* glide home across the lake. It was almost time for happy hour when I heard the sound of footsteps coming up the gangplank.

‘You have a press conference at 4pm tomorrow.’

It was my close friend Rauf Trambo. While I knew that Rauf had been up to something since I had arrived back, I had not thought anything would materialise. Why, I asked myself would anyone be interested in hearing about the trials and tribulations of a middle-aged Australian who has just completed a trek, albeit a long one?

But that was not how Rauf saw it. For him the opportunity was one not to be missed. ‘All the local press and TV will be there, including Rigzin.’ Rauf referred to Rigzin Jora, a Ladakhi politician, a longtime friend, sometime guide and now the Minister for IT, Labour and Employment in the Jammu and Kashmir state cabinet.

‘All you need to do is say a few words ... for about fifteen minutes.’

The press conference was planned along the lines of a Kashmir wedding. Rigzin would assume the role of the bridegroom while I would be the bride! Our marriage would take place in a shady enclosure on the far shores of Dal Lake not far from one of the famous Moghul gardens. The plan was for the Minister, the press and guests to gather by 4pm and when all were assembled, I would arrive. According to the schedule, Gulam Badyari was to drive me to a nearby parking lot where we would wait for the signal that everything was ready. Yet our best-laid plans did not factor in a last-minute oversight. When all was ready a motorcyclist was sent to get us. As fate would have it he sped off in the wrong direction and only after ten minutes did he realise his error. The result was that by the time he had turned around and located us we were at least twenty minutes late.

Our belated arrival was greeted with a sigh of relief. As soon as I stepped out of my car well-wishers placed garlands of marigolds over my head. I was hurriedly escorted to the VIP area. However, just before I reached the dais it suddenly dawned on the police that I had not had a security check. After several animated conversations a senior police officer escorted me back through a security arch that had been erected earlier that afternoon. I then waited patiently while two police checked my marigold garlands for any hidden arms or ammunition.

‘Garry, welcome back!’ was all I could recall when at last Rigzin and I exchanged hugs. Another old friend was also there on the dais to greet me, Mohammed Ashraf, who had just retired as the Jammu and Kashmir Director General of Tourism. Wiping the sweat from my brow I prepared for my fifteen minutes of fame. I talked of my love of trekking and how I longed to return to Kashmir. The speech was a success. The next morning pictures of the Australian Santa Claus were on the front page of the local newspapers while snippets of my talk were replayed on a number of Indian TV and other channels. In the interview that followed I was also asked some pertinent questions.

‘Mr Garry, if there is a travel advisory issued by your government not to come to Kashmir then why have you ignored it?’ asked Altaf Hussein, the BBC representative in Kashmir.

‘Do we do everything governments advise us to do? I replied. ‘Here I have many good friends and I have faith in human nature.’

I was also asked whether I had felt unsafe at any time during my trek.

‘No, not at all,’ was my sincere reply.

Yet, no one would want to underplay the ‘dark side of the valley’. In the *Himalayan Mail*—a local newspaper published in conjunction with the *Indian Express*—there is a daily toll of fatalities for the year. On 9 October 2003 it stood at civilians 491, militants 1009 (ten had been killed the previous day), security personnel 189. Tragic as this was, it was still a vast improvement on my short visits a decade ago when the sound of machine-gun fire could be heard clearly resounding across Nagin Lake at night.

‘Sir, do you believe Kashmir should be for India or Pakistan?’

That was a question I had also been asked when catching the bus from Nagin Lake to the city during my first visit in 1970. Nagin is close to the university and many a student would ask the same question, of course unaware at the time that war would break out between India and

Pakistan the following year. Then, as now, it was a question I could not easily attempt to answer.

At that time it was twenty-three years since Hari Singh the Fourth Maharajah of Jammu and Kashmir, and a Hindu, had reluctantly conceded his Himalayan kingdom. Given the choice of being part of India or Pakistan he wanted only independence for Kashmir. It was an impossible dream. Just over two months after India's independence in August 1947 a band of mercenaries from Pakistan advanced to within a stage or two of Srinagar. The first Indian Prime Minister, Jawaharlal Nehru, could not risk Srinagar falling into Pakistani hands. Orders were given for Indian troops to fly to Srinagar to defend the capital. In the political manoeuvring that followed, Hari Singh had little option but to flee to Jammu where he signed the papers making Kashmir part of India. After a prolonged war between the Indian and Pakistan forces a ceasefire line was established on 1 January 1949. While this was intended to bring stability to the Kashmir Valley, the predominantly Muslim population was denied the choice to determine their own future. For many years their calls for a plebiscite fell on deaf ears. Further fighting broke out between the Indian and Pakistan forces in 1965 and in 1971 after the Bangladesh war. As a result of the Shimla agreement in 1972 the ceasefire line was formally recognised as the Line of Control separating the Indian and Pakistan forces. Yet there was no long-term accord and cross-border fighting continued throughout the ensuing decades, with the most serious fighting erupting in 1999 during the Kargil War.

Although I had packed away my boots I needed a day to rediscover my old haunts. Setting off early one morning a couple of days after my arrival I walked to Hazratbal mosque, its white dome and minarets built in a style more akin to the Middle East than to Kashmir. It could not have been a more serene setting. Villagers paddled across the open waters of Dal Lake, shopkeepers removed their wooden shutters as they prepared for the day's business, while men and women dressed in their *feruns* sauntered across the paved forecourt of the mosque on their way to prayers. It was a far cry from the images portrayed by the international media in the early 1990s. This was a time when on more than one occasion groups of separatists—young men often still in their teens—with heads partially covered by balaclavas had brandished AK-47s above their heads in defiance of the authorities, as they barricaded themselves inside the mosque.

I headed past the mosque and followed the road that skirted the northern perimeter of Dal Lake. Beside the road there were signs—'Save Dal Lake', 'Green Kashmir'—erected by environmental groups. They were concerned about the amount of weed that was steadily choking the waters of Dal Lake; a problem caused by years of unregulated development, including the raw sewage from the houseboats. Specially imported machinery mounted on a wooden platform and with metal blades designed to rip out the weeds was being employed alongside more traditional methods of weed control. I watched as lean muscular bodies working from dugout boats propelled long wooden poles into the shallow water to entwine the weeds. It was salutary to consider that unless their efforts succeeded the entire surface of Dal Lake would be completely covered in weed in the next decade or so.

I walked for a further hour to the Nishat Gardens, one of the famous Moghul gardens located on the east side of Dal Lake. After purchasing my entrance ticket, I ascended a series of concrete steps. I had thought I would have the place to myself but instead there were Indian tourists posing in family groups beside the water fountains and flower gardens. Almost immediately, an Indian family called me over. 'Please Sir, snap us,' asked the father. He and his wife and three children then stood to attention, bolt upright. The more I tried making faces or waving my hands in the air the more they stared solemnly at the camera. It took what seemed like an age before they eventually broke into a glimmer of a smile.

At the far end of the garden about half a kilometre above the entrance I sat under the shade of one of the huge chinar trees. In a few weeks' time the leaves would turn, providing a blaze of golden colour that would last almost into winter. In the meantime I was content to savour views down through the gardens and across Dal Lake that would have delighted the great Moghul emperors.

I took a three-wheeled taxi scooter to Dalgate, a popular area for Indian tourists keen not to be far from the bustle of the city, the shopping and the many *dhabas* and local eateries. This was also where most of the many hundreds of houseboats were moored. Before I could even pay the driver of the scooter I was surrounded by young men, some barely out of their teens, who were anxious to do business with me.

'You need a houseboat?'

'I will take you to my handicraft showroom?' they pleaded, anxious for any business. The number of 'To Let' signs on the houseboats was a sure indication that the season was almost over. It would be another long winter before the next Indian tourists, together with a handful of foreign ones, visited the Kashmir Valley.

From Dalgate it was a short walk to Nedou's Hotel. Although many British visitors in the inter-war years stayed on houseboats, short-term visitors would often stay at what was considered the best hotel in town. Its heyday had long since passed, however. Even when I first visited Kashmir the hotel was in dire need of renovation and nowadays the Indian army occupied it. The high brick walls were topped with barbed wire, there were dugouts for sentries in the once-acclaimed gardens, while the verandahs outside the dilapidated rooms were covered in laundry. It was hard to imagine that this was the same hotel the British adventurer Peter Fleming had checked into after completing his epic journey from Peking in September 1935. In his classic *News from Tartary* he describes his arrival at Nedou's Hotel.

*... Srinagar was much bigger than we had imagined it. So was the hotel. Its imposing portals loomed up and abashed us. Painfully conscious of uncouthness, of dusty clothes and blackened faces, we enter almost surreptitiously; People were gathering in the lounge for dinner ... Everyone was in evening dress. Anglo-India, starched and glossy, stared at us with horror and disgust ... A hush through which on all sides could be heard the epithet 'jungly' descended on the assembled guests. We were back in civilization.*

*We advanced, through a barrage of shocked looks and muttered disapproval to the reception desk and booked rooms. A surly babu answered curtly and his manner dampened what was left of our spirits.*

*'Will you please register?' he said.*

*With a last poor attempt at swagger we both wrote Peking in the 'Where from' column; but it might have been 'Poona' for all the impression it made on the babu. We turned back to the alien and hostile lounge. The journey was over.*

With a lightness of step that came from months of walking in the mountains I headed across the polo ground—now a football-cum-cricket field—to Zero Bridge, where the Jhelum River flows into the city of Srinagar. I sat beside a wide pathway, known as the Bund, that extended several kilometres into town. This was where the original houseboats had been moored, but now less salubrious ones were moored along the riverbank. One side of the Bund was lined with shops and banks with mock Tudor façades that would have accommodated the needs of visitors intent on staying for the season. Signs advertising fishing tackle and camping gear were still displayed together with the names of the merchants, including my old friend Suffering Moses who had died a couple of years ago. A modern concrete post office, built alongside the former post office, was one of the few modern developments. The old building was now used as a sorting office and brought back memories of how I used to come each day to the counter to check on my mail. 'Please check under G for Garry as well as W and Weare,' I would plead, in case any of my precious letters from home had been misplaced.

Behind the Bund was the former British Residency. In its day it would have been a haven for distinguished travellers and dignitaries; a place where you might have been fortunate enough to meet Colonel Younghusband, the Kashmir Resident between 1906 and 1909. This was a time when the manicured lawns and gardens were tended by an army of gardeners and invitations to visit the Residency were highly coveted during the height of the social season. After independence the Residency was converted to the Jammu and Kashmir Arts and Handicraft Showroom. Several years ago the building was destroyed by fire although it is not clear whether this was a result of separatist activity. Judging by the scaffolding and retinue of laborers milling around the construction site, it looked like it might not be too long before the building was restored.

By now it was time for lunch. I quickened my pace as I headed down Residency Road and up the flight of concrete steps to Ahdoo's. Entering the large restaurant, I was greeted by a waiter well beyond retirement age. He seemed to recognise me even though I had not visited the restaurant for seven years. 'Salaam Sahib' he said as he directed me to a table close to the window. Grinning from ear to ear he presented me with a menu that had not changed since I was last there. Just for once I abandoned my beloved rice and dhal and ordered the best chicken masala and nan in town. Ahdoo's had fared better than most enterprises in Srinagar. During the turbulent times in the 1990s the rooms above the restaurant had provided a base for foreign and Indian media teams keen to be in the midst of the action. In more peaceful times the restaurant would be full of local businessmen consuming huge plates of rice and *roghan josh*.

As I left Ahdoo's a young man stopped me. He gazed at me with all the intensity of someone overwhelmed by the prospect of talking to the only foreigner in sight.

'Do you think we are at war? Sir, is this war zone?' he asked, as he directed my attention to the lack of military activity. Then he added, 'Please tell your friends to visit our Kashmir.'

Perhaps I should. After all, the army bunkers have almost disappeared and the curfews, house

searches and gun battles that were the norm in the early 1990s are nowadays a rarity. Yet no one can predict when or where the next troubles will erupt. Less than a week after my departure a small group of armed separatists carried out a day-long gun battle outside the Chief Minister's office, scarcely a block away from Ahdoo's, before being shot dead by the Indian security forces.

The day before I departed, Gulam Badyari and I took a day trip to the hill resort of Gulmarg. It was only an hour's drive from the city to Tangmarg and from there we drove a further 15 kilometres up the mountain road to what is often hailed as India's premier ski resort. In summer Gulmarg is a refuge for Indian tourists seeking respite from the heat of the Kashmir Valley. Driving around a wooded ridge we viewed the picture perfect meadow. A huge grassy bowl several kilometres wide was interspersed with conifer trees. To the west the conifers gave way to high alpine meadows that merged with the glaciers and peaks of the Pir Panjal.

Even before Gulam parked his car the pony attendants were tapping at the windows and forcing open the car doors.

'*Sahib*, only Rs100 (US\$2) per hour.'

As I squeezed out of my door the pony attendants implored me to take the reins of their horses. 'No' was not an answer they were prepared to accept. In the end, after five minutes or so, of twisting and turning and constant cajoling I finally caught up with Gulam who had already ambled off along the outer perimeter road.

The track passed derelict cottages that would have been the pride and joy of the British when they stayed in Gulmarg a century ago. Judging by the views you could understand why. In the distance we could just make out the upper ramparts of Nanga Parbat—the westernmost peak in the Himalaya Range that is now located in Pakistan. Much closer, the peak of Harimukh was clearly visible looming above the northern reaches of the Kashmir Valley.

Gazing at the peak I surmised that if all had gone to plan I would have been camping at Gangabal Lake—at the base of Harimukh—at this time. I remembered that I needed to give Gulam my bottle of Ganges water for safekeeping until I returned next year. Lost in thought, I turned my gaze towards the summit with its icy ridges glistening in the late afternoon sun.

'Don't worry, you will be back,' Gulam offered.

I nodded and imagined how it would feel to return and complete the trek next summer.

At Srinagar airport the next day a security officer inspected my baggage before I checked in for my flight to Delhi.

'You have been trekking?'

'Yes.'

'Where from?'

'Gangotri,' I replied.

Without so much as an acknowledgement I was waved through. I wondered if Peter Fleming would have been suitably impressed.





## **CHAPTER 18**

### **Kashmir-Unfinished Business**

Thajiwas camp near Sonamarg, Kashmir, 11 July 2004. Little had changed since last October. The Gujar shepherds were herding their buffalo to the higher meadows while the women washed their clothing in a bubbling steam. Ragamuffin children played without supervision as village elders sat on the roofs of their stone and earth dwellings, smoking their hookah pipes and passing the time of day. Close to camp, the Sonamarg Development Authority had seized the initiative. Since last autumn they had built wooden benches for Indian tourists to sit on and admire the mountain panorama. The tourists could also now deposit their plastic drink bottles and snack wrappings in brightly coloured litterbins more suitable to suburban Delhi than to the mountain climes of Kashmir.

I had already spent a couple of nights staying on *New Maharajah's Palace*, checking the hull and discovering that the re-caulking work had been completed—nearly! I had also caught up with friends and collected the plastic bottle full of Ganges water that I had left with Gulam Badyari last October. It had felt good to be back and, after repacking my trekking gear, I had driven up the stretch of road to Sonamarg that I had walked down the previous autumn. At last I could complete my trek to Gangabal Lake and pour my bottle of water into one of the sacred sources of the Indus.

This time I was taking no chances at having my plans thwarted. The previous evening I had walked 2 kilometres across the alpine meadows to Sonamarg to meet the Tourist Officer, a Mr Malik, to double-check my plans with him.

'I am fifty-five and retire in three years,' he had confided. Mr Malik was looking forward to his retirement. Unshaven and dressed in his light brown *ferun*, he looked more like a pony attendant than a government official.

'We must check with the army,' he had announced.

So, after Malik had changed into his neatly pressed white shirt, grey trousers and well-worn woollen jacket, we had walked down to the army headquarters where I had had such a disappointing meeting last October. At the entrance a security guard had turned us away.

'Officer sleeping till 8pm, then come back.'

So we did. On our return the young lieutenant from Purne in charge of 'Alfa Section' Sonamarg was wide awake. His duty was to oversee the vehicle convoys between Sonamarg and Ladakh. He had been up since before dawn so who could deny him a late afternoon snooze.

'Please,' he said offering us hot sweet coffee, 'there is no problem that I know on that side (nodding towards Gangabal), but I will ring and inform officer in charge, Major A. K. Singh.' Then he confided, in an almost conspiratorial tone, 'He is a Sikh you know,' perhaps drawing my attention to the well-known anomaly that while all Sikhs are Singhs not all Singhs are Sikhs.

Major A. K. Singh's phone line was engaged. In between attempts to get a line the young lieutenant fielded calls from his senior officers elsewhere in Kashmir, anxious to know whether their friends from Delhi were being looked after. Most would spend the night in Sonamarg before driving for 20 kilometres to complete the trek to the holy cave of Amarnath.

'Sir, they have not brought much warm clothing with them so I have given them blankets.'

What had these visitors been thinking when they set out from Delhi or Chandigarh? Sonamarg is subject to inclement weather at any time of the year and the walk from nearby Baltal to the Amarnath cave is no stroll in the park, even if many do hire riding ponies to take them most of the way to the cave.

At last after several attempts, the call to Major Singh got through.

'Right Sir.'

'A Mr Garry from Australia.'

'Yes Sir, from Australia.'

'OK Sir, I will do the necessary.'

Replacing the phone receiver he smiled. 'There is no problem. You may proceed.'

Standing almost to attention, we shook hands and I thanked Mr Malik. Quietly relieved, I then left and returned to my camp.

Rashid Sangloo, my trusted cook, and his assistant Ashmat were here with me. They had been up early to pack the tin trunks with supplies, bright red kitbags, a plastic container full of kerosene and a canvas stool for me to sit on. It looked as if we were undertaking a major expedition rather than a five-day trek.

'Have you also brought the kitchen sink?' I asked Rashid, while Ashmat hovered around uncertain of his role. A languid Mr Bean character with a pencil-thin moustache, he did not seem to be a mountain man, but he was Rashid's friend.

My other friends had deserted me. Rauf Tramboo, who had organised the press conference in Srinagar the previous October, could not accompany me. This year he was the organiser of a mini-marathon due to be held in a week's time. Several hundred Kashmir students had already signed up and he was up to his neck in last-minute arrangements. However, he wanted to ensure my fifteen seconds of fame for 2004. 'The organising committee would like you to flag off our mini-marathon.'

I was flattered.

Rauf's expectations were high. 'In the next few years we will invite students from Pakistan. We will call it "The Peace Marathon".'

If that wasn't enough, my longtime friend Meraj Din had also found a very convenient excuse not to accompany me. His brother was getting married. For years Din had managed our trekking operation in Kashmir. When the troubles erupted he secured a lucrative job running a trekking agency in Kathmandu. Each summer he returned to Kashmir to see his family and dream about the day he could re-establish his operation. But for the time being he was in charge of arranging his younger brother's wedding, which was to be held in a couple of days' time. 'I have 700 guests, it's too much, but as my father died last year my mother tells me I must not insult his memory. What to do? When my two daughters get married they will have small weddings.'

Indeed, the Chief Minister in the Jammu and Kashmir state had recently introduced legislation limiting marriage parties to just fifty guests as a way of containing excesses in the Kashmir Valley.

I mused on how things might have been if my friends had been able to come with me. At first I was a little upset. I had after all been planning the return trek for the past year and had looked forward to Rauf and Din joining me. Yet I had to accept that they were both busy and I would just have to get on with it. As my mind wandered over the logistics for next few days I failed to notice our two horsemen arrive. On arrival the previous day, Rashid had engaged two mule attendants with their three mules to carry our trekking gear. He had agreed to what at first had seemed outlandish rates of Rs500 (US\$10) per horse, per day.

'Are we hiring these horses or buying them?' I had asked. However, although the fees were double the government rate I had no choice. The Hindu pilgrimage season to Amarnath was underway and horses were at a premium. Who could blame the horsemen for bargaining for more after so many years of ill fortune?

It was agreed that we would reach Gangabal Lake in four days and on the fifth trek to Narannag, a small village and the site of an ancient Hindu temple. From there a jeep would take me back to my houseboat so that I could flag off the mini-marathon the following morning. It was a tight but achievable itinerary.

This was my first trek to Gangabal since 1987. I could not believe seventeen years had passed already. As I ascended the switchbacks a glorious vista of meadows, conifer forests and alpine peaks unfolded before me. To the east was the village of Sonamarg straddling the road to Ladakh. In the background was the Zoji La, dwarfed by a backdrop of huge peaks that formed the main crest of the Himalaya Range.

Approaching the meadow of Shok Dharan our two pony attendants and their three mules passed me, anxious to spend a few hours at their summer encampment before continuing the trek. Gulam and Ashraf Khan were Gujar shepherds who lived with their families at Shok Dharan, an

encampment a solid hour's ascent from Sonamarg. Each spring they migrated from their village in Kangan, lower down the Sindh Valley, to their winter home. As soon as the snows melted they rebuilt the roof of compacted earth supported by silver birch branches that was their home from June until September. While some of the men tended to the buffalo, others took their mules to Sonamarg to earn income from Indian tourists intent on riding the short distance to Thajiwas Glacier or heading to the Amarnath Cave.

Shok Dharan, with its earth and boulder dwellings perfectly camouflaged on the hillside, sat amid rich pastures and was ringed by silver birch trees. I watched the young children play in the vast meadow, their Himalayan playground. Tiny bare-foot figures in oversized *feruns* climbed boulders, threw stones at the buffalo, called each other names, hit each other with small sticks, and cried and laughed—all in a matter of seconds. A far cry from my childhood spent wandering the back streets of suburban London.

I did not at first realise that Rashid was studying my boots with all the interest of an out-of-work cobbler.

'You should give those boots to the museum,' he remarked, chuckling to himself as he recognised that these were the same boots that I had worn last October. Pretending to open out my pockets and cry poor did not stop him making a few further comments about my less than stylish trekking apparel.

On the summit of the Nichanni Pass (3970 metres) I could see last night's camping site. It had been a gradual ascent to the pass set beneath towering granite cliffs and hanging glaciers. An hour later Rashid, Ashmat and the two mule attendants caught up with me. As if on cue Rashid burst into a Bollywood movie hit.

'Do you want to cause an avalanche?' I pleaded in mock horror as Ashmat and the mule attendants joined in the chorus.

The descent from the pass was pure delight. Acres of colour—yellows, reds and blues—carpeted the meadows. It was at first hard to believe the sheer variety of wildflowers. Dipping into the authoritative *Flowers of the Himalaya* I could appreciate why so many of the colour plates had been taken in this corner of Kashmir. The array would have kept a dedicated botanist busy for weeks. There seemed no end to the number of species: from aster to edelweiss; hardy primula; fields of white and pale yellow anemone; *ranunculus*; tiny clusters of white *Saxifraga sibirica*; as well as the purple and yellow *Aster falconeri* that thrived alongside the distinctive deep yellow flowers of the *Pedicularis bicornuta*.

Two hours after leaving the pass we set up camp just below the lake of Vishen Sar. From my tent I could hear the mellifluous voices of the Kashmiri chattering among themselves. I recalled the good old days when groups of trekkers would delight in comparing their experiences here with those in the high peaks of Nepal. Kashmir would often win hands down.

Soon after our arrival a wizened bearded character with a closely trimmed grey beard and hardly a tooth to his name approached our camp. It was the face of a man who had seen many seasons in the mountains. For a moment I could not recall his name but the Fishing Inspector had no difficulty in remembering mine.

'Stand up, Mr Garry, stand up,' he cried as he released his arms from under his voluminous *ferun*. Before I could get to my feet I was locked in a bear hug. Without prompting he recalled the names of cooks, guides, assistants and pony men who had accompanied our trekking groups. 'I go trout fishing just for you,' he concluded.

He and Rashid unpacked the fishing rods and headed to the lake. Before long four sizeable rainbow trout were on offer, a legacy of the British who lived in Kashmir and introduced brown and rainbow trout to the high alpine lakes of Kashmir a century ago.

'Next time, Garry *Sahib*, please bring groups again. *Inshallah*.'

And with that he was off.

A kilometre down the valley was an army camp. I had seen the men on patrol earlier in the day on their daily hike to the Nichanni Pass and expected for someone to come over and demand to inspect my passport. When after a few hours no one turned up I decided to do the right thing and report.

Stepping briskly into the army camp I waved my passport, expecting at least to register. Instead I was in for a surprise.

'No passport necessary,' the sergeant replied, confident that I posed no threat to security. 'Are

you enjoying this fine trek?' he asked.

'Yes,' I replied, refraining from uttering any heartfelt feeling at being back after so many years.

'Where are you from?' This was a more predictable question that even I could answer in full.

'Australia.'

'Austria?'

'No Sir,' I replied, 'Australia.'

For a moment the sergeant seemed perplexed, then it suddenly dawned on him. 'Cricket.'

'Yes,' I acknowledged, as I swung an imaginary cricket bat in the air.

'Ah, Ah,' he nodded. With that we shook hands, both of us now free to idle away the afternoon.

From Vishen Sar I watched the ever-changing light on the granite peaks and glaciers reflected in the emerald green waters of the lake. On the far bank Rashid was trying his luck with the huge trout that lurked in the deep waters. Casting his rod he slowly drew his line just beneath the lake's surface. It was a ritual he repeated perhaps a dozen times before hitting the jackpot—a sizeable specimen that he later cooked to perfection. A freshly baked apple pie topped off my trekking banquet. It was a welcome break from my rice, dhal and vegetable routine.

The following morning, heavy swirling clouds engulfed the valley. Although Kashmir is not subject to the monsoon rains, a storm does occasionally break over the Pir Panjal Range causing continual and often heavy rain for days at a time. I could not see any break in the clouds, and so by 8am we had no option but to pack up and move off in the downpour. Ahead of us was a steep, slippery 300-metre ascent to the Vishen Sar Pass. Soon after we began the day's stage the rain turned to sleet and fogged up my glasses. After a while the sleet turned into snow, settling on my rain jacket. As I trudged on I noticed my overpants were caked in mud. While there were no wondrous views from the pass, the mist occasionally lifted to provide a glimpse of the granite peaks that stretched back towards Sonamarg.

It was a long and sodden two-hour descent past the tiny lake of Gad Sar to our next camp. Marmots scurried across the meadows, whistling their hearts out before disappearing down their burrows. I glanced down the valley where a shaft of sunlight provided a glimmer of hope that the clouds were not as heavy as I thought.

The Vishen Sar Pass marks a cultural divide. The pastures from Sonamarg to Vishen Sar are the traditional domains of the Gujar and Kashmir shepherds. Beyond the pass, the Bakhraval assume the grazing rights. The Bakhraval and the Gujar share a common ancestry although the Bakhraval do not live in Kashmir. Each spring they migrate from the hills above Jammu—areas close to the Indo-Pakistan line of control—to graze their flocks. It takes about a month for them to complete the migration to their summer encampment where they stay from late June until September.

Wrapped in his woollen shawl the Bakhraval patriarch, a tall gaunt figure with a long hennaed beard and a pronounced hooked nose, surveyed our camp. Like most shepherds he had not a clue as to why I was trekking. Neither did he care. For him life was a struggle. The half a dozen families owned several hundred sheep and goats and a few buffalo that provided a small cash income from milk, butter and cheese sold to villagers half a day's walk down the valley. After paying the workers to shear their flock and government grazing fees there was not much left over. Heating and cooking was on an open fire, with the women heading down the valley each day to collect bundles of wood. Medical facilities were practically non-existent with irregular visits from the government medical workers. In this idyllic mountain valley even a minor accident could be fatal.

Like the Gaddi, the Bakhraval lifestyle is now increasingly under pressure from the government authorities. Legislation has been passed encouraging the Bakhraval to settle in the foothills of Jammu. There is also a trend among the new generation to shun their traditional lifestyle and seek a life away from the mountains. Education is a factor. Only in the last decade or so has there been a concerted effort to send teachers to these remote encampments. However, I discovered that this year the children had enjoyed a long summer vacation, as the teacher from Srinagar had not turned up.

Half a dozen impish children too young to go on the mountainside on their own sat outside Rashid's tent. He gave them half a packet of glucose biscuits. Satisfied, they headed up the hillside.

Later that day a line of ten Indian soldiers marched down the valley towards the Bakhraval settlement.

'It is an army patrol,' Rashid informed me in case I had forgotten what an army patrol looked like.

'I didn't think it was a marriage party,' I retorted.

Although accompanied by a Bakhraval guide, the patrol did not stop at the settlement. Neither did they approach our camp. They were intent on reaching a village several kilometres down the valley by nightfall. Keeping a careful watch over these valleys was of overriding importance to the security forces, but they were used to the trickle of foreigners. Over the last few days I had seen a handful of French, Swiss, British and Japanese trekkers. They represented a new era of visitors to Kashmir. The former age of innocence had come to an abrupt end in 1995 when the Al Faran, a little-known militant outfit, took five foreign trekkers hostage.

The hostages included two British trekkers, Keith Mangan and Paul Wells; an American, Donald Hutchings; Dirk Hasert from Germany; and Christian Otto from Norway. All were taken hostage during the first week of July 1995 while trekking out of Phalagam, a hill resort about 90 kilometres from Srinagar. Just over a month later the Norwegian was beheaded and, after being led endlessly along trails on the rim of the Kashmir Valley, the other four were last sighted in December 1995. Although there is no conclusive evidence it appears that they were shot after being handed over to local militants. The events that unfolded in the latter half of 1995 drew waves of horror and anger from the vast majority of the Kashmir people, including all of the other separatist organisations. I followed the case closely. I had been in Kashmir staying on my houseboat for a few days in June 1995. The horror and disgust that I first felt at the fate of these innocent trekkers still remains with me. Until then I had believed that foreigners were somehow immune from random acts of violence in this troubled corner of the Himalaya.

The next day, 15 July, I set off early, for today I would reach Gangabal Lake. I packed my plastic bottle of sacred water in my rucksack for the last time. By late morning I was close to the final pass leading to the lake, but the clouds had closed in and suddenly, without warning, it began to hail. I thought back to my first pass crossing the previous May when a mighty hailstorm had continued for five hours. This time the hail lasted just twenty minutes. At 11.45am I reached the top of the ridge. The peak of Harimukh was lost in cloud but some 1000 metres below the summit I could see Gangabal Lake. Around 3 kilometres long and half a kilometre wide, it flowed into the tiny lake of Nundkol.

A few minutes later Rashid joined me on the pass. I shook his hand, although for the moment Rashid did not fully appreciate why I was so euphoric. Fourteen months after setting out from Gangotri I had finally made it!

Ashmat and the pony attendants arrived twenty minutes later. By now the clouds had rolled in again and Gangabal Lake was lost from view. Rumbles of thunder echoed across the mountainside. We needed to get down. Our luck held. The first heavy spots of rain were short-lived and within an hour we were in striking distance of Gangabal and the nearby Nundkol Lake, where we intended to camp on our last night.

High above Nundkol Lake the sacred peak of Harimukh loomed out of the clouds, its huge glaciers appearing to be suspended in mid-air, as if they could break off and plunge into the tranquil waters of Nundkol without warning. Soaring gracefully, a pair of lammergeiers hovered on the thermals. And in the lake, trout occasionally broke the surface, tempting Rashid to bring out his rods.

It was late afternoon. I retrieved from my rucksack the plastic container of sacred water that I had taken from the source of the Ganges when setting out on my trek in May 2003. Heading around the shore of Nundkol, I ascended the grassy slope to Gangabal. The sun dipped below a mountain ridge, the silver waters of the lake rippled in the light breeze. I knelt alongside the stream where the waters flowed down to Nundkol and expressed silent thanks before pouring the milky water out of my container. In an instant it had swirled and merged with the swift current that would flow into the Kashmir Valley and finally into the Indus.

## **Bibliography**

The bibliography provides a selection on the rich cultural and natural history of the West Himalaya.

Comprehensive accounts of traverses across the Himalaya include Graeme Dingle and Peter Hillary, 'First across the Top' and Sorrell Wilby, 'Across the Top'. Invaluable sources of reference include Kenneth Mason, 'Abode of the Snow'; Ian Cameron, 'Mountains of the Gods'; Soli Mehta and Harish Kapadia, 'Exploring the Hidden Himalaya' and John Keay, 'Where Men and Mountains Meet'.

### **HIGH PASSES TO MANALI**

(Chapters 2 to 8)

Stephen Alter, 'Sacred Waters' provides an absorbing account of pilgrimages to the sacred sources of the Ganges. Also read any of Bill Aitkin's books including 'Touching Upon the Himalaya' and 'Footloose in the Himalaya'. During the early chapters I refer to WW Wilson, 'A Summer Ramble in the Himalaya' as a fine example of an extended trek across the Indian Himalaya in the 19th century. For wildflowers there is no better guide than Oleg Polunin and Adam Stainton, 'Flowers of the Himalaya'. Similarly indispensable is Bikram Grewal and Otto Pfister, 'Birds of the Himalaya'. For 19th century background refer to AFP Harcourt, 'The Himalayan Districts of Kooloo, Lahaul and Spiti' while more contemporary accounts include Penelope Chetwode 'Kulu-The End of the Habitable World' and Christina Noble, 'Over the High Passes' and 'At Home in the Himalayas'.

### **HEADING NORTH TO LEH**

(Chapters 9 to 13)

There is no shortage of books on Ladakh. For cultural history refer to David Snellgrove and Tadeusz Skorupski, 'Cultural History of Ladakh, Volumes 1 & 2; Romi Khosla, 'Buddhist Monasteries in the West Himalaya' and Madanjeet Singh 'Himalayan Art'. There is also Janet Rizvi, 'Ladakh' and 'Trans Himalayan Caravans', Michel Peissel, 'Zaskar - The Hidden Kingdom' and Heinrich Harrer 'Ladakh'. 19th century accounts include Thomas Thomson, 'Western Himalaya and Tibet'; Alexandra Cunningham, 'Ladakh' and AH Franke, 'A History of Ladakh'. Other must-reads are Andrew Harvey, 'Journey into Ladakh' and Helena Norberg-Hodge, 'Ancient Futures'. For pure inspiration obtain one of the limited editions of Jaroslav Poncar and Jorg Schmeisser, 'Ladakh - Land of the Passes' and 'Ladakh' by Prabir Purkayastha

### **TRAVERSE TO KASHMIR**

(Chapters 14 to 18)

Refer to Pearce Gervis, 'This is Kashmir' and Brigid Keenan, 'Travels in Kashmir' and also Sudha Khola, 'The Tiger Ladies'. Since 1990 there have been all number of political accounts including AK Akbar, 'Kashmir Beyond the Vale' and Christopher Thomas, 'Faultline Kashmir'. For 19th century accounts refer to Younghusband, 'Kashmir'; Walter Lawrence, 'Kashmir' and Tyndale Biscoe 'Kashmir in Sunlight and Shade'. Try also to get one of the editions of 'The Tourist's Guide to Kashmir, Skardo etc' by Arthur Neve for a fascinating insight into how treks and travels were undertaken a century ago.

## Acknowledgements

In helping me get my feet firmly on the trail I cannot express my thanks strongly enough to Harsh Vardhan and Wangchuk Shamsu, long time friends and directors of World Expeditions (India) as well as to my guides including Almas Khan who accompanied me on the first two months of my trek. To Norboo Tshering and Angchuk Nye who trekked with me in Ladakh and Rauf Tramboo who took charge in Kashmir. There were also the cooks who never complained. They include Jeet Chetri, Dilip Shrestha and veteran chef Rashid Sangloo who took control of the mess tent when I reached Kashmir.

In the rest days in Manali it was good to catch up with Iqbal Sharma and his son Himanshu Sharma; in Leh with Rinchen Shamsu and Nawang Tshering and in Srinagar, Kashmir with the Badyari family and my firm friend Meraj Din. During these times I could also maintain an element of contact with home. For those middle of the night calls from Australia I thank my daughter India Weare while it was also good to hear from my friends and fellow Australian Himalayan Foundation directors Christine Gee, Simon Balderstone, Lincoln Hall and Michael Dillon as well as Ian Williams, Sue Badyari and NAK from World Expeditions.

For help in transforming my random jottings into an account of my trek I am indebted to Sydney adventure travel writer John Borthwick and to editor Anouska Jones who diligently ensured that the book was knocked into shape.

On completion the manuscript was forwarded to my long-term friend, Margaret Gee, a Sydney based literary agent who never failed to encourage me that there was a story to be told.

My thanks also to Maninder Kolhi for his input just before the book went to press; to my stepdaughter Ruby Thomas for her creative input and Ian Faulkner for converting my ill devised sections into legible maps.

Finally, I express my gratitude to Peter Hillary for his initial encouragement to undertake the trek with an ample supply of single malts and for writing the introduction.

A week after returning I had a call from Margie Thomas who was the Hon-Secretary of the Australia-Tibetan Society. Margie was checking on the status of a trek I was scheduled to lead in Ladakh the following year. Not only did Margie undertake the trek but within a year she also became my wife. It is to Margie that I dedicate this book.







## **ABOUT GARRY WEARE**

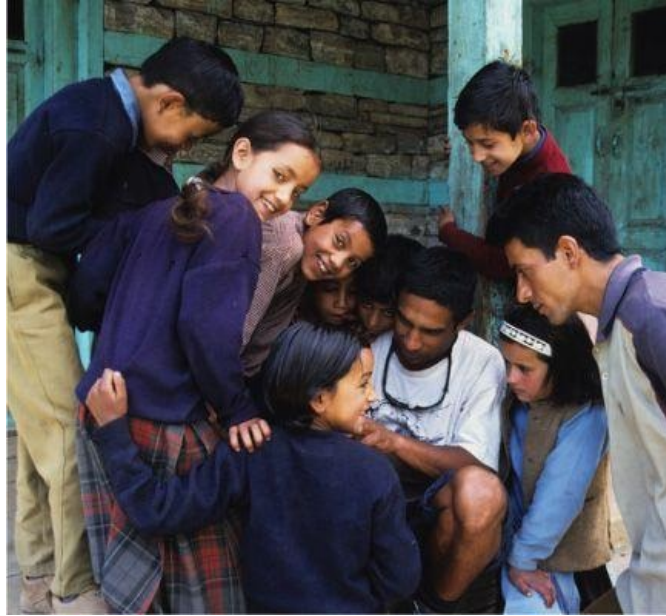
English born Garry Weare has had a long-standing relationship with the Himalaya. In 1970 he first went to Kashmir to teach. On the spur of the moment he went trekking, savouring an experience that was to mark a premature end to his academic career. It also changed his life.

In April 1973 Weare placed a modest two-line advertisement in *The London Times*. As a result he led his first trek from Kashmir to the Buddhist region of Ladakh at a time before the region was officially opened to tourists. The trip was by no means uneventful with Weare and his group of travellers being detained for two weeks in a police lockup. It was not the most auspicious beginning for a career in adventure travel.

After a two-year stint in the Australian bush, Weare returned to Kashmir where he pioneered many classic treks. He also met the co-founders of Australian Himalayan Expeditions, now World Expeditions, a group that was destined to become one of the leading adventure travel companies in the world and one that Weare still maintains a close working relationship with.

For thirteen years Weare maintained an enviable lifestyle operating his treks from the comfort of his houseboat in Kashmir. It led a journalist to describe him as 'the man that lived in paradise'. Following the political unrest in Kashmir in 1990 Weare returned to Sydney. He did however return regularly to the Himalaya, either leading exploratory treks or researching his *Trekking in the Indian Himalaya* guidebook published by Lonely Planet and now in its 4th edition.

Weare is a life member of the Himalayan Club, a fellow of the Royal Geographical Society, and a noted mountain photographer. He is also a founding director of the Australian Himalayan Foundation that now occupies a considerable part of his working life. He has one daughter and two stepdaughters and lives with his wife Margie Thomas in the Southern Highlands, NSW, Australia.



From the Pin Parbati pass the porters are dwarfed beneath the sheer scale of the Himalaya



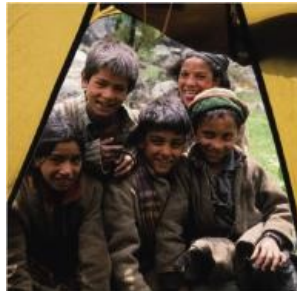
School attendance is encouraged even the most remote mountain village



Almas Khan and Indradev Panda at Tabovan above the sacred source of the Ganges Kathmandu



Jeet Chetri – the finest cook this side of Kathmandu



Gaddi shepherds migrate each summer to the high alpine pastures of Lahaul

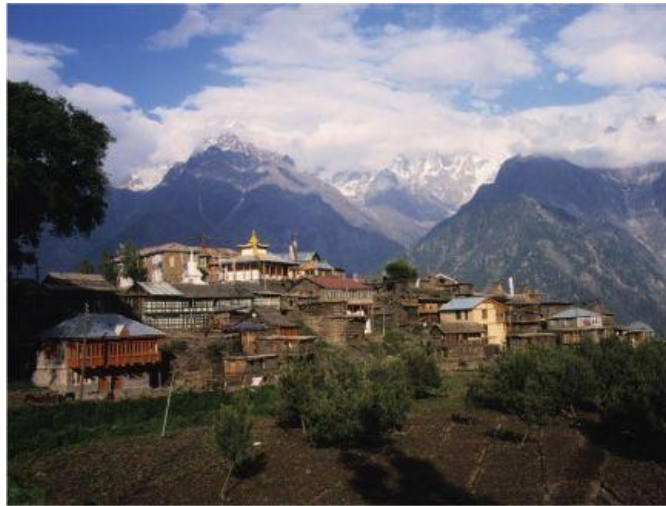


The children in the Garhwal are forever curious of the trekking routine





Norboo Tshering (guide), Dilip Shrestha (cook) and Biro Negi (our indefatigable muleman)



Indrasan (6221m) rears above the Hampta Pass



Kalpa, the former capital of Kinnaur



Matho monastery, situated in the upper Indus Valley, Ladakh



The Wind Horse is embedded on colourful prayer flags throughout Ladakh



Buddhist wall paintings - found in monasteries throughout Ladakh



Victory Fort – overlooking the historic town of Leh



Buddhist monks attend the morning prayer session at Phugtal monastery



View from Dung Dung La - the dramatic light makes Ladakh so special



Gujar elder - reflecting on a lifetime living in the Kashmir mountains





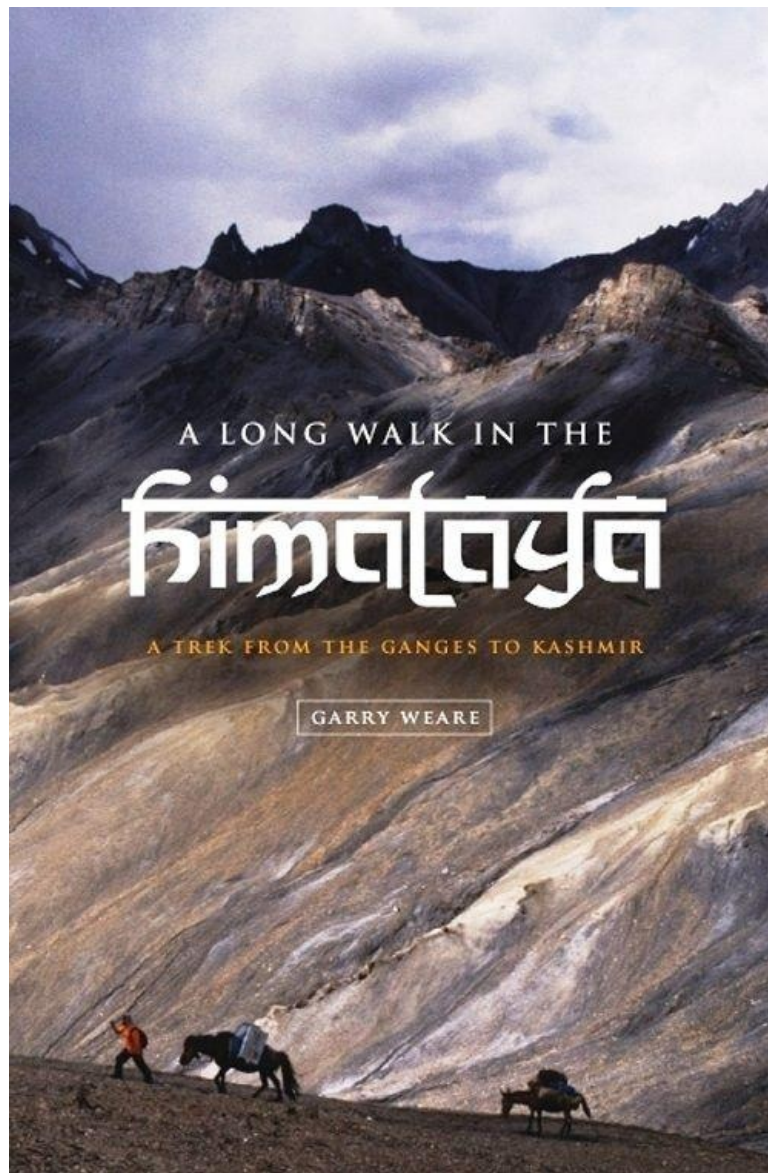
Fishing for rainbow trout, Vishen Sar, northern Kashmir



The alpine meadows in Kashmir are carpeted with wildflowers throughout the summer.



Author and children engage in an alfresco class, Kashmir



Sunset on Nagin Lake, Srinagar, Kashmir

0€f